

North Carolina's Coastal Habitat Protection Plan Overview

Purpose: The North Carolina General Assembly established the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan program within the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) through passage of the Fisheries Reform Act of 1997. The Act (General Statute 143B-279.8) requires preparation of Coastal Habitat Protection Plans (CHPPs) for critical fisheries habitats in the coastal area. The Act states “[t]he goal of the Plans shall be the long-term enhancement of coastal fisheries associated with each coastal habitat.” Within DENR, the Divisions of Marine Fisheries, Water Quality, and Coastal Management are designated as the lead agencies for implementing the CHPP program. Many other DENR agencies also participate in CHPP work. By law the CHPP must describe and evaluate the functions, values, status, and trends of all habitats, identify existing and potential threats, and recommend actions to protect and restore the habitats.

Implementation: The Coastal Resources, Environmental Management, and Marine Fisheries commissions adopted the CHPP in December of 2004. After the CHPP was adopted, the first two-year implementation plans were adopted by each of the three original commissions in June - July of 2005. Currently, the associated agencies are working under the 2011-2013 implementation plans. The second iteration of the full plan, and updated recommendations contained in the plan, were approved by these same commissions, as well as the Wildlife Resources Commission, in 2010. Rulemaking and policy actions taken by all four commissions are to comply “...to the maximum extent practicable” with the plan.

Reporting: The commissions with membership on the CHPP Steering Committee are to report by 1 September each year to the Environmental Review Commission, and as of 2012, to the Joint Legislative Commission on Governmental Operations, on their progress in implementing the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan. The purpose of the Annual Report is to report on the progress made by the respective commissions and their supporting divisions, as well as other DENR divisions, and agencies within the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, in implementing the CHPP during the preceding year (Sept. – Aug.). Each of the four reporting commissions have two members on the CHPP Steering Committee.

Habitats: The CHPP focuses on six basic fish habitats: water column, shell bottom, submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV), wetlands, soft bottom, and hard bottom. A chapter is devoted to each type. Each of the habitat chapters is organized to provide the information specified in the Act.

Focus Areas: The CHPP describes the functions of habitats necessary for production of economically important fish stocks and the links between those habitats and various life stages of the fish. The CHPP also discusses the various types of threats to the habitats upon which productive coastal fisheries depend. Moreover, the plan summarizes the institutional structures for management of fisheries habitat, adjacent lands, water quality, and fisheries in eastern North Carolina. Finally, the plan includes numerous management recommendations for the Coastal Resources, Environmental Management, Marine Fisheries and Wildlife Resources Commissions, DENR and its agencies and other partners to implement in order to address the identified threats.

Goals: The CHPP also identifies four primary goals which help to focus available resources on habitat protection. The four goals are: 1) Improve effectiveness of existing rules and programs protecting coastal fish habitats; 2) Identify, designate and protect strategic habitat areas; 3) Enhance habitat and protect it from physical impacts; and, 4) Enhance and protect water quality. These goals are each broken down into recommendations, with associated action items. These action items are the key component in the two-year CHPP Implementation Plans.