JOSH STEIN
Governor

D. REID WILSON
Secretary

KATHY B. RAWLS
Director

MEMORANDUM

TO: Coastal Resources Commission
Environmental Management Commission
Marine Fisheries Commission
Coastal Habitat Protection Plan Steering Committee

FROM: Charlie Deaton
Division of Marine Fisheries
Zach Harrison
Division of Marine Fisheries

DATE: September 25, 2025

SUBJECT: Coastal Habitat Protection Plan Steering Committee Meeting

The Coastal Habitat Protection Plan (CHPP) Steering Committee met virtually with a listening session held at the Division of Marine Fisheries Central District Office at 1:00 p.m. on Thursday, September 25, 2025. The following attended either in-person or via Teams:

Commissioners: Bob Emory, Larry Baldwin, Kevin Tweedy, Yvonne Bailey, Willie Closs, Dr. Doug Rader
DMF Staff: Charlie Deaton, Dr. Michelle Brodeur, Daniel Royster, Dr. Derek Detweiler, Coral Sawyer, Barbie Byrd, Ann Daisy
APNEP Staff: Dr. Bill Crowell, Dr. Tim Ellis, Natalie Rodriguez, Riley Ragain
DCM Staff: Cameron Luck, Jonathan Lucas, Daniel Govoni
DEQ-OGC Staff: Christine Goebel
DEMLR Staff: Samir Dumpor
DWR Staff: Tammy Hill, David May, Michelle Raquet, Elizabeth Kountis, Forest Shepherd
Public: Dr. Rachel Gittman (ECU/NC Collaboratory), Bree Charron (NC Coastal Federation), Anne Coan (NC Farm Bureau Federation), Melissa Futrell (County of Currituck), Dr. Aaron Bunch (The Nature Conservancy), Lisa Rider (Coastal Carolina Riverwatch), Michelle Eitner (Town of Beaufort), Ralph Tramontano (Carteret County Wildlife-NC Sierra Club), David Sneed (CCA-NC)

Meeting Minutes

Chair Doug Rader called the meeting to order at 1:00 p.m. The Committee approved the previous meeting minutes by consensus following a motion by Commissioner Larry Baldwin and a second by Commissioner Yvonne Bailey.

NC Coastal Fish Habitats: Findings and Recommendations – Presentation by Rachel Gittman

Rachel Gittman with East Carolina University and the North Collaboratory presented findings from a General Assembly funded effort to assess the status of coastal fish habitats and develop recommendations to improve management. She noted that while a summary report has been completed, a more comprehensive report is expected in late 2025 or early 2026. The presentation reviewed available data on key structured coastal habitats, including wetlands, submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV), oyster reefs, and water quality.

Analysis of NOAA's Coastal Change Analysis Program from 1996 to 2021 indicates an overall loss of both freshwater and saltwater wetlands across North Carolina's coastal counties. Freshwater wetland losses were observed in all counties except Hyde County, while saltwater wetland losses occurred in 12 of 20 coastal counties. Losses ranged from less than one percent to greater than five percent depending on location, with land use conversion and other stressors identified as primary drivers.

For SAV, Gittman reported declines in both high and low-salinity systems. High-salinity SAV declined approximately 6.5% between 2006 and 2013, with losses observed across all regions. Low-salinity SAV losses were estimated to exceed 33%, though data limitations remain significant due to the lack of long-term monitoring in these systems. She emphasized the need for consistent mapping and monitoring to better understand trends.

Oyster habitat assessments indicate that while monitoring programs such as DMF's Estuarine Benthic Habitat Monitoring Program provide useful data, they do not offer comprehensive statewide coverage. Long-term mapping of oyster habitat extent is lacking, and available estimates suggest approximately 29% habitat loss over the past 125 years in certain waterbodies.

Water quality monitoring was described as insufficiently aligned with the areas most impacted by degradation. Key indicators, including total nitrogen and chlorophyll levels in systems, such as the Albemarle Sound, show no improvement and in some cases declining conditions. Monitoring capacity has also decreased compared to the early 2000s.

Gittman also reviewed implementation progress under the 2021 CHPP. While some actions are underway, many remain in progress or unaddressed, particularly those related to

mapping and monitoring. She noted that while the goal of protecting and restoring 191,000 acres of SAV has been formally committed to, this does not reflect actual restoration outcomes. She also noted that progress has been made on high-resolution wetlands mapping, which she emphasized as critically important.

The presentation concluded with several preliminary recommendations, including establishing a centralized habitat coordination office, developing a long-term monitoring program at regular intervals, convening a recurring task force to evaluate habitat conditions, and establishing thresholds for habitat loss and water quality decline that would trigger management action.

Following the presentation, Commissioner Baldwin asked whether the recommendations would be available to the public. Gittman responded that the final report will be publicly released and that draft sections could be shared upon request prior to publication.

Commissioner Rader asked how the team's analysis handled the shifting regulatory definitions of wetlands at the state and federal level. Gittman explained that the team relied on available datasets, such as NOAA data, which have inherent limitations and do not consistently capture all wetland types. She noted that improved mapping resolution will help refine classifications but acknowledged that regulatory definitions may continue to evolve.

Commissioner Rader also raised the issue of how to track habitats that may fall outside regulatory definitions.

Commissioner Bailey commented that the Committee's focus should remain on habitat protection rather than regulatory classification, noting that the group is not constrained by changing definitions when considering what resources to protect. She asked whether oyster aquaculture was considered in the habitat analysis considering they are still providing ecosystem services. Gittman responded that aquaculture was not included as habitat in this assessment but acknowledged that it may provide ecosystem services, including fish habitat and water quality benefits. She also noted potential trade-offs, such as impacts to SAV from bottom leases, and agreed that aquaculture should be considered in future analyses. Commissioner Bailey commented that a great study would be to look at oyster farm effects on SAV based on type of gear.

The discussion continued with consideration of trade-offs among habitat uses, including aquaculture, recreational access, and impacts such as propeller scarring in SAV beds. Commissioner Rader noted that these trade-offs present ongoing management challenges

and may result in shifts among habitat types rather than net gains. Commissioner Rader also suggested the potential addition of a recommendation focused on defining measurable habitat goals. Gittman agreed that establishing clear, measurable targets is important but noted the complexity of defining success at the ecosystem level. She emphasized the need for improved mapping and monitoring data to support such efforts.

Proposed 2026 CHPP Amendment Framework Review – Presentation by CHPP Staff
CHPP staff presented an overview of the proposed framework for the 2026 CHPP amendment. The framework includes focus areas related to ecosystem-based management, SAV protection and restoration, wetland change planning (including migration pathways), and community engagement for habitat protection.

During discussion, Commissioner Rader expressed support for the overall direction and emphasized the importance of prioritizing both existing habitats and areas at risk of future change. He noted that saltwater intrusion is having significant impacts not only on fisheries but also on agricultural lands in the Albemarle and Pamlico regions and asked whether the framework could address these issues. Charlie Deaton responded that the effort would need to account for a wide range of user groups within limited resources. He noted that staff intend to build on existing work across DEQ divisions, other agencies, and partner organizations, including efforts by the North Carolina Coastal Federation. He added that the framework will focus on areas most likely to experience change and that monitoring efforts are shifting toward targeted "sentinel sites" rather than attempting to map entire systems.

Commissioner Rader encouraged Steering Committee members to identify specific, localized issues for consideration, including operational changes in water management systems such as those on the Albemarle-Pamlico Peninsula. He emphasized the importance of recognizing subtle shifts and suggested that public outreach could help identify additional concerns.

Commissioner Emory noted the importance of incorporating agricultural concerns into discussions of marsh migration and expressed support for the inclusion of these issues in the framework. Charlie responded that staff would incorporate lessons learned from other regions and ongoing work related to thin-layer placement and migration planning.

Commissioner Rader also raised additional habitat concerns discussed in other forums, including anadromous fish spawning habitats and conditions in wind-tidal brackish creeks where sedimentation and shoreline hardening may be affecting habitat function. Charlie responded that sedimentation in these systems represents an area in need of further

research, noting that some observed impacts are associated with land-use practices such as timber harvesting.

Commissioner Rader emphasized the importance of identifying targeted, actionable issues that the Committee can address over the next five to ten years. Charlie noted that evaluating barriers to implementation will be an important component of the amendment process and agreed that additional attention to anadromous fish habitat is warranted.

Commissioner Rader also raised concerns regarding the relationship between private land management and habitat impacts, citing examples such as river herring.

Public Comment Period
During public comment, Aaron Bunch of The Nature Conservancy provided an update on ongoing research examining climate-driven changes in fish migration, spawning, and early life stages in the Roanoke River watershed, with potential expansion into the Cape Fear system. Results are expected to be presented in the coming year.

Commissioner Rader asked how many issue papers would be developed as part of the amendment process. Charlie responded that one issue paper is anticipated for each topic area.

Additional Items
Doug Rader indicated that he would follow up regarding potential involvement of the HWQ Advisory Committee. Staff will explore opportunities to coordinate.

Adjournment
Doug Rader adjourned the meeting at 3:00 pm.