



**Zeke’s Island Reserve  
Local Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes  
Friday, November 7, 2025, at 10 am  
Fort Fisher State Recreation Area – Education Room**

**Attendance**

<b><u>LAC Partner Organization Members</u></b>	<b><u>Present</u></b>
Division of Parks and Recreation – FFRA, Jeff Owen	Yes
Division of Archives and History, Stephen Atkinson	No
NC Aquarium at Fort Fisher, Renee Weeks	Yes
Natural Heritage Program, Judith Ratcliffe	No
<b><u>Community Members</u></b>	
Stephen Rice	No
Angela Marshall – call in	Yes
Jack Housenger	No
Bob Dillard	No
Georgia Busch	No
<b><u>Others Present</u></b>	
Elizabeth Pinnix, DCM/NCNERR Southern Sites Manager	
Morgan Penrose, DCM/NCNERR Stewardship Specialist	

**Welcome – Elizabeth Pinnix**

The southern sites manager welcomed the committee to the fall 2025 meeting, reviewed the agenda, and led introductions.

**Reserve-wide Administrative Update – Elizabeth Pinnix**

The Reserve-wide Update was shared with committee members prior to the meeting. The update in its entirety is included as Appendix A.

The site manager solicited feedback regarding a new proposed reserve-wide policy and is described below.

*The Reserve is developing a policy that would prohibit the sale of retail items, including food, on Reserve sites. This means that retailers will not be able to obtain permission to sell goods at Reserve sites through the Reserve’s Special Activity Authorization process. Retail sales of goods, such as food, on a Reserve site conflict with the principal purposes of the Reserve as defined in the NC Administrative Code. These sales are not compatible with traditional use of the Reserve, and the activity has the potential to disturb the environment and interfere with compatible educational and recreational activities that occur on the site. Traditional uses are defined as public trust uses including fishing, hunting, navigation, and recreation (15A NCAC 070 .0102 (3)). The need for this policy came about in July 2025 because ice cream was being sold from a boat at the Rachel Carson Reserve in Beaufort. The business’ special activity authorization application was denied due to the above*

*reasons. We've also denied this use in the past, when requested, before the special activity authorization process was implemented.*

The following feedback was provided from the committee:

*Mr. Owen stated that state parks does allow outside vendors for concessions within the park. There are strict standards they must follow to maintain the contract to sell, and the state receives 10% of the sales, which he adds is helpful for a state recreation area with limited resources for the public. Additionally, there are limits on the number of vendors they can have on contract at a time. He is in support of the new policy for the reserve and acknowledged if the reserve adopted a similar model to state parks it would be difficult for the reserve to enforce.*

*Ms. Marshall noted she has not seen vendors attempting to sell any goods at the Zeke's Island Reserve before but would continue to keep an eye out and report to the site manager if seen. She was also in support of the policy.*

*Overall, the committee members present were in support of the proposed policy.*

### **Site Specific Update – Elizabeth Pinnix**

#### *General site conditions and activities*

The site manager reported the following:

- Reserve staff have conducted multiple site visits during the summer and fall with no major concerns. There have been numerous high water events pushing wrack onto the upland portions of the islands and high visitor usage from various user types including power boats, fishing, kayaking, wind/kite surfing, and bird watching.
- Coming in 2026, we will be installing a marked kayak trail within the basin and surrounding marsh.
- In September we hosted a public paddle event to celebrate National Estuaries Week, and this was made possible by Ms. Marshall with Kayak Carolina for her leadership and donation of equipment. Seventeen people attended the event and had the chance to learn about the reserve.
- Two reports of misuse (unauthorized wedding and abandoned crab pots) were documented at the Zeke's Island Reserve in 2025 by reserve staff and were addressed in a timely manner. This reporting helps us identify the reoccurring issues on the sites and how we can improve or address these.
- Fish sampling and general species documentation via [iNaturalist](#) has continued by our stewardship staff and interns throughout the year. These are submitted to the NC Natural Heritage Program yearly and are publicly available. We encourage you to document what you see on the site, both plants and animals.
- New plant ID signs will be installed along the social/walking trails on Zeke's Island proper that help the public identify common marsh and barrier island plants. Special thanks to Ms. Marshall and her staff for installing these for the reserve. The signs showcase species like purple muhly grass, eastern cedars, and sea lavender. Thanks to Angela and her staff at Kayak Carolina for being willing to install these for us.

#### *New and ongoing projects*

The site manager reported on the following:

- The reserve's two storm resilient research platforms that house water quality monitoring equipment near the end of the basin trail and at the Cribbings are in place and equipment will be deployed soon to begin collecting data again. Our research staff hope to have these up and running by spring 2026.
- Prescribed marsh burning: NC State Parks, led by Eastern regional burn coordinator Laura Webster, approached the reserve about a proposed burn plan for the marsh areas surrounding Zeke's Island at Fort Fisher State Recreation Area. The proposed burn was to take place in the spring 2025 but was postponed due to a statewide burn ban and crews being called elsewhere. They intend to pick this back up at some point, and I will alert the committee when I am provided with more information. According to NC State Parks, the goal of the burn is to "improve existing habitat" specifically for black

rail populations that have been documented historically in the area. Examples of these burns can be seen at Piney Island near Cedar Island National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and according to Parks burn crews, has proven successful for providing ideal habitat for black rails.

- The Reserve is in communication with the crews in order to ensure Zeke's Island Reserve property is avoided and long-term marsh monitoring transects near the boat ramp are excluded within the burn area.

*Mr. Owen added that the burn crew has been down to prep the area in the past couple of months, including marking fire lines and creating their burn plan. Additionally, this burn may help clear out the wrack line in the upper marsh habitat. He added there will be outreach and signage done to address the public, as well as Public Information Officers (PIO) on site to answer questions and handle public concerns. He suggested the next window of opportunity for a burn will likely be early 2026.*

*Ms. Marshall expressed concern with the burn taking place during the spring when the public is using the site. Additionally, she questioned if marsh burning was common practice and if it had been done at this site before.*

*Ms. Pinnix responded this has not been done at this site before but has been completed at multiple other state park properties and NWR sites including Goose Creek and Hammocks Beach State Park.*

*Ms. Penrose asked if the burn crew aims to put this site on a more consistent burn schedule?*

*Mr. Owen responded yes, he foresees if the burning is successful that the crew would want to add the site to a regular burn schedule depending on feasibility and resources. Ultimately, the crews would need to burn on a regular occurrence to create the ideal habitat they are aiming to create.*

- Resilience Plan: The reserve received funds to create resilience plans for all our national reserve sites (Masonboro, Zeke's, Rachel Carson, & Currituck). The Rachel Carson plan has been completed, the Masonboro plan is in the final stages, and the Zeke's plan is still in process with the resilience workshop taking place November 2025. The goal of this process is to assess the threats and stressors on the habitats of the reserve sites and develop plans with identified research and monitoring needs that we can use to implement projects on the ground to address resilience. To learn more about the process, please check out the [Zeke's Island Resilience Hub](#). More information will be provided as the plan is written and finalized.
- [Army Corps of Engineers Wilmington Harbor 403 Project](#): Public comment period regarding the ACOE Wilmington Harbor Environmental Impact Statement closed just before this meeting was held. The Division of Coastal Management has provided comments regarding the project including impact concerns to Zeke's Island habitats. We continue to be in discussions with the ACOE and will provide updates as they become available.
- New resources & signage: The reserve has updated our informational brochures and Zeke's Island versions are now available in [Spanish](#) and [English](#) (print & virtual options available). Additionally, on our website, we have included a ["Reserve Safety" page](#) in both languages to help the public stay safe while visiting our sites.
  - Additionally, the site manager asked for feedback about needed signage near the boat ramp and public access areas that could improve reserve visibility, safety, and education at the sites. The sign design will be similar to the existing sign at the basin trail overlook (see attachment for example).

*Ms. Marshall informed the committee that she has documented individuals camping near the boat ramp in the vegetation, despite the signage that exists. She was supportive of additional signage and offered her assistance for installation.*

*Mr. Owen agrees that additional signage is a good idea and including dual language (Spanish and English) signs is necessary given the visitation demographic.*

*Ms. Weeks agreed and suggested additional language that stresses “pack in, pack out” practices because litter is a big problem in this area.*

*Mr. Owen agreed with litter being a large problem in this area and suggested a greater law enforcement presence.*

*Ms. Pinnix agreed this would be a good idea and would reach out to the Sheriff’s Department to see what options there were to increase patrols and presence.*

### **Roundtable**

*Ms. Marshall announced that she is starting a membership kayak club and will send out an email with more information. This would include local weekly paddle meetups or events, including a Zeke’s Island clean up day.*

*Ms. Pinnix requested Ms. Marshall let her know when she plans to do a clean up day so the reserve can provide resources and help to haul off the debris collected.*

*Mr. Owen offered the dumpsters at the state park as a resource for disposing of the debris.*

*Ms. Weeks announced the NC Aquarium at Fort Fisher will be closing sometime in the first of the year for ~2.5 years to undergo renovations. They are looking into securing a satellite location, potentially at the mall, to provide outreach and office space for staff.*

*Mr. Owen reported that funding restrictions have resulted in cuts to seasonal staff in the parks system. For Fort Fisher, this means potentially 18-20 seasonal staff and includes lifeguards that work to protect the public at the recreation area.*

*Ms. Weeks was concerned by this statement, especially since the recreation area is the only place on the island with free parking.*

*Mr. Owen said they are working to address this and will hope to readdress in the new year.*

### **Public comments**

None

### **Action Items**

- Provide update to the committee when proposed prescribed burn will take place at Fort Fisher State Park.
- Share information regarding Ms. Marshalls Kayak Club when provided.
- Solicit feedback for draft signage to be installed near the public boat ramp at Federal Point.

## **N.C. Coastal Reserve and National Estuarine Research Reserve Fall 2025 Local Advisory Committee Meetings Reserve-wide Update**

### Periodic Rules Review for Reserve Administrative Code Rules

The Coastal Reserve's rules, 15A NCAC 070, are scheduled to be reviewed by the Rules Review Commission in April 2026 as part of the Legislative Periodic Review and Expiration of Existing Rules process (G.S. 150B-21.3A). This process requires that all rules are classified as necessary or unnecessary. Following input from the Local Advisory Committees and Coastal Resources Commission, all 8 15A NCAC 070 rule citations are classified as necessary in the proposed initial determination.

This **proposed initial determination is currently published for public comment September 30, 2025-December 1, 2025** on the [Department of Environmental Quality and reserve's websites](#). After the comment period ends, the Department will review all comments and make final determinations prior to submission to the N.C. Rules Review Commission for approval in April 2026.

The Division will provide an update to the Local Advisory Committees after the public comment period closes with a summary of and agency responses to the comments received during the public comment period and from the Local Advisory Committees and Coastal Resources Commission. See the memorandum emailed to committee members on September 24, 2025 summarizing committee and commission input.

### Preview of items for 2026

- **Local Advisory Committee Operating Procedures Review:** Per the Operating Procedures, the document shall be reviewed every 5 years and is up for review in 2026. Reserve staff will review the document and propose changes if necessary. The Local Advisory Committees will provide feedback on the proposed changes at the spring 2026 meetings and the document will be finalized later that year. If a spring meeting is not held, feedback on the proposed changes will be solicited via email.
- **Local Advisory Committee Community Member and Organization Application Period:** The reserve will solicit applications from community members and organizations to fill vacancies on the committees in spring 2026. Newly appointed and re-appointed members will begin their terms in 2027. Appointments are made by the Secretary of the Department of Environmental Quality.
- **N.C. National Estuarine Research Reserve Management Plan Update:** The management plan is scheduled for its 5-year update as required by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and staff are working on updates to the plan now. Proposed changes will be brought to the national site Local Advisory Committees (Currituck Banks, Rachel Carson, Masonboro Island, and Zeke's Island Reserves) in 2026 for feedback.

### Program Highlights

- The Division celebrated the **40th anniversary** of N.C.'s National Estuarine Research Reserve this year, designated by the state and NOAA to protect special places in N.C. including the Currituck Banks, Rachel Carson, Masonboro Island, and Zeke's Island Reserves. This designation inspired the state to later create the umbrella N.C. Coastal Reserve which is authorized by the N.C. Coastal Area Management Act.
- The reserve hosted its fourth stop on the "**Discover the N.C. Coastal Reserve**" tour on May 16, 2025 at the Masonboro Island Reserve. The tour began with brief remarks by Department Secretary Reid Wilson, Division Director Tancred Miller, UNCW Center for Marine Science Executive Director Ken Halanych and Bill Raney, Masonboro Island Reserve Local Advisory Committee member, followed by a boat trip to and nature walk at the site. The event highlighted how the Masonboro Island Reserve serves North Carolinians through its science and monitoring,

delivery of information to educate and inform decision making, and by providing natural buffers to waves and storms enhancing community resilience. Explore the [Discover the N.C. Coastal Reserve's Virtual Passport](#) and enjoy short videos from past tour events. Local Advisory Committee members will be invited to the site-based events so stay tuned for upcoming event information in 2026.

- Spring **student field trips** to the Rachel Carson Reserve and Masonboro Island Reserve via the Island Explorer Program were a big success and fall trips are underway.
- Reserve **summer camps** were well attended this year. Rising first through tenth graders learned about estuaries and experienced estuarine habitats and plants and animals through hands-on experiences at the Rachel Carson Reserve and in the laboratory to increase understanding and appreciation of coastal resources. Camps are conducted in partnership with the N.C. Maritime Museum in Beaufort.
- The reserve hosted a variety of **workshops** since the spring update. Participants at all workshops received continuing education credits.
  - Educators participated in a “*Teachers on the Estuary*” workshop in June, a program that is delivered at reserves nationwide and tailored to N.C. content. Participants engaged in hands-on experiences at the Rachel Carson Reserve such as measuring marsh vegetation, learned how drones are being used to inform management of coastal resources, and became familiar with our data and curricular offerings to use in the classroom.
  - The training program hosted “*Adaptation Planning for Coastal Communities*” in partnership with NOAA’s Office for Coastal Management to build skills for incorporating adaptation strategies into planning processes.
  - The training program held “*Living on a Barrier Island*” workshops for Cape Fear and Outer Banks realtors.
- The reserve was selected for **funding and participation in several NERRS Science Collaborative projects**, a program that funds applied science to meet reserve needs within the national reserve system. *Unfortunately, the funding for these projects was cut by NOAA in the latest round of budget reductions.* Staff will explore alternate ways to accomplish these important projects.
  - Justin Ridge, Research Coordinator was to lead a ~\$1M project in collaboration with Whitney Jenkins, Training Coordinator titled “Drone-Based Analysis of Intertidal Oyster Reef Condition to Enhance Fishery Management in the Southeastern U.S”, with the 5 southeast reserves participating.
  - Reserve staff planned to participate in 3 other funded projects focused on submerged aquatic vegetation, tools to enhance utilization of NERRS science, and transferring realtor training models to other states. The N.C. training program serves as a model for realtor training within the system and would help share this approach with other reserves.
- **Public access at the Bald Head Woods Reserve** is enhanced because of a partnership with the Village of Bald Head Island. The golf cart parking platforms were improved, transitioning to a more durable and lower maintenance design that provides additional spaces for golf cart parking. Thank you, Village of Bald Head Island!
- The reserve celebrated **National Estuaries Week** September 20-27, 2025 by hosting a variety of activities in tribute to N.C.’s estuaries; thank you to all who came out to help us celebrate estuaries! Below are some of the activities that were held.
  - Masonboro Island Reserve: Site steward volunteers participated in a debris cleanup on the site’s dredge spoil islands.
  - Zeke’s Island Reserve: Staff led a public paddle trip around the site and participants learned about the reserve and participated in a community science activity – a bioblitz of the area using iNaturalist. Kayak Carolina partnered with us to provide equipment, thank you!

- Rachel Carson Reserve: Volunteers and partner agencies participated in a Bird Shoal cleanup and community science day. Participants picked up debris and used iNaturalist to practice identifying plants and birds.

Student Internships

- The reserve had a fantastic group of interns this summer in Manteo, Beaufort, and Wilmington. The students worked on a range of stewardship and research projects at sites along the coast. These invaluable experiences give the students hands-on experience in research and natural resource management and help inform their future career paths. Thank you to Friends of the Reserve, the N.C. Internship Program, and UNCW for their support and partnership for the internships.
- Student opportunities for summer 2026 in our Manteo, Beaufort, and Wilmington offices will be announced soon on our website.

Federal Budget

The budget table below is a summary of the federal budget\* for federal fiscal years 2024-2026 as it relates to the N.C. Coastal Reserve.

- Congress passed a continuing resolution for federal fiscal year 2025, continuing fiscal year 2024 funding levels for fiscal year 2025. Receipt of funds was delayed several months and are now in place to fund the reserve from July 2025-June 2026.
- As Congress did not pass a budget or continuing resolution prior to October 1, 2025 for federal fiscal year 2026, the federal government is shut down until a budget or continuing resolution is passed. The President’s budget zeros out the related budget lines and the Senate and House marks restore funding for the programs. Once Congress is back in session and a continuing resolution is passed, the next step would be to reconcile the budgets between the two chambers. Federal fiscal year 2026 funds would fund the reserve from July 2026-June 2027.
- Thank you to the National Estuarine Research Reserve Association and Friends of the Reserve for their work to educate Congress on the value of the national system and the NCNERR.

Federal Budget Lines	FY2024 Enacted	FY2025 Full Year Continuing Resolution (FY24 levels)	FY2026 President’s Budget	FY2026 Senate Mark	FY2026 House Mark
NERRS Operations	\$33.3M	\$33.3M	0	\$34M	\$33.5M
NERRS Procurement, Acquisition, & Construction (PAC)	\$8.5M	\$8.5M	0	\$8.5M	\$10M
CZM Grants	\$81.5M	\$81.5M	0	\$81.5M	\$81.5M

\* The federal fiscal year is October 1-September 30. The National Estuarine Research Reserve System (NERRS) budget line provides funding to the 30 reserves within the system through cooperative agreements that are matched by the states and supports national coordination of programs and implementation of system-wide and competitive projects. The Coastal Zone Management (CZM) grants budget line provides funding to coastal states with approved coastal management programs through cooperative agreements that are matched by the states. The Division of Coastal Management (DCM) receives funding from both budget lines to operate the N.C. National Estuarine Research Reserve (NCNERR) and N.C. Coastal Management Program. The CZM cooperative agreement that DCM receives provides funding for state site reserve staffing and operations, and administrative support.