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Chesapeake Bay Recreational Angler Fish Habitat Workshop Report

NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office (NCBO), in cooperation with the Office of Habitat Conservation and the National Recreational Fisheries Initiative, hosted two regional workshops focused on fish habitat in the Chesapeake. These workshops provided an opportunity for NOAA to share information about its fish habitat activities in the Chesapeake Bay, for the recreational community to share habitat conservation priorities, and for both groups to identify areas for possible collaboration around habitat. Workshop goals included:

- Increase NOAA's understanding of habitat issues of greatest importance to the recreational fishing community.
- Raise awareness among recreational angling groups of NOAA's habitat conservation work, including restoration, monitoring, and research.
- Identify areas where NOAA's interests and expertise around habitat conservation align with the priorities of recreational angling community.
- Identify potential collaborative project concepts and/or research priorities.

Workshops were hosted in Edgewater, Maryland on October 9th and in Charles City, Virginia on October 15th, 2019. Participants included anglers from local fishing clubs, charter boat captains, state and federal natural resource management representatives, and non-government staff focused on the Chesapeake Bay and its watershed. Both meetings opened with participants sharing where they fish in the Chesapeake and discussing their main habitat interests. Participants from both Maryland and Virginia shared many of the same priority issues coming into the meeting:

- Water quality
- Artificial reefs and reef balls
- Understanding the relationship between habitat and fish productivity
- Climate change impacts & acidification
- Lower species diversity
- Recruitment of a new generation into the fishery; loss of opportunity
- Declining submerged aquatic vegetation
- Oyster restoration
- Coastal engineering & coastal restoration

- Angler engagement in Bay stewardship; fishing as outreach and education
- Accessing information (websites/data apps) - generational differences
- Access to fishing areas
- Co-benefits of habitat (water quality, climate resilience)
- More focus on tributaries - as conduits of poor water quality
- Invasive species

NOAA staff then gave presentations about ongoing challenges facing fish habitat in the Bay and current efforts to address those challenges. After the presentations and large group discussions, the meeting moved to small break out groups where participants were asked to identify collaborative actions that NOAA and recreational anglers could pursue together. The major takeaways NOAA heard from workshop participants included:

- Scale up restoration activities: NOAA is collaborating with partners on several ongoing restoration activities, notably the largest oyster restoration effort of its kind (Harris Creek). However, many opportunities remain to increase the size and impact of oyster restoration activities to help improve Chesapeake Bay fish habitat and water quality. Participants suggested nearshore waters and Maryland's Eastern Bay as ideal locations for large-scale habitat restoration activity, as well as identifying strategies to restore latent leased bottom in Virginia.
- Increase restoration activities in shallow water: Tributaries offer a great opportunity for local anglers and residents to see habitat restoration (e.g., oysters, SAV, wetlands) firsthand, making them more likely to support and care about the project. Further, headwaters and tidal sections of rivers, including the Potomac, are important to overall Bay health and present opportunities for restoration and shoreline stabilization.
- Embrace new species and oyster reef technologies: Continue work on oyster reef restoration and consider possibilities for other bivalves, such as mussels. Explore new oyster reef technologies that allow oysters to grow off the bottom.
- Increase communication and education: Use a variety of media that anglers rely on to highlight and bring attention to ongoing restoration activities (e.g., oyster restoration) and science in the Bay. Focus on youth education through events that combine fishing and outreach around the work being done to improve habitat in the Bay. Participants also underlined the importance of managing expectations around the benefits of oyster restoration to fish abundance -- emphasizing that this is a long-term outcome that will take time.
- Engage anglers in citizen science activities: Some recreational anglers are on the water almost daily, and can help collect needed data. However, time is limited and it is important for NOAA to be clear about what data are most useful and how the information will be integrated. One research priority

anglers highlighted was to identify and improve striped bass spawning habitat.

Workshop participants also provided feedback on the [Chesapeake Bay Interpretive Buoy System \(CBIBS\)](#). Participants were very supportive of the CBIBS system and close to 100% of the anglers in attendance utilized the data provided when planning their fishing. Recommendations included expanding buoy locations (into larger tributaries) and getting water column and/or bottom data for temperature and dissolved oxygen. The CBIBS system keeps anglers informed and safe on the water and NOAA should be directing anglers to that real time data.

The feedback NOAA received at these workshops was incredibly valuable. We will work to incorporate the participants' input and ideas into our existing programs and planning activities. The call for increased outreach and education presents a clear opportunity for greater collaboration with the recreational fishing community to engage the general public around our mutual priorities in the Chesapeake Bay. There are numerous grant programs and potential funding mechanisms that will be explored to find the funding needed to execute the ideas discussed.

NOAA Fisheries is excited to continue these conversations with recreational anglers as collaboration is key to achieving our shared goal of improving fish habitat in the Chesapeake Bay.

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