

American Fisheries Habitat: An Initiative (Framework) for Action

In its report *A Partnership Agenda for Fisheries Conservation*, the Sport Fishing and Boating Partnership Council (SFBPC) recommends to the Secretary of Interior and Director of the FWS that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) become the catalyst among stakeholders to develop a national aquatic habitat plan analogous to the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. In its *Fisheries Program Vision for the Future*, the FWS responds to that call and indicates it will “work with Federal, State, Tribal and other partners to explore the benefits of a National Aquatic Habitat Plan and the appropriate FWS role in its development and implementation.”

The SFBPC Fisheries Program Strategic Plan Steering Committee continues to believe such an effort is needed to reverse declines in the fisheries and aquatic resources of this country. To that end, an informal *ad hoc* subgroup of the original Steering Committee met several times to consider the advisability of the SFBPC leading a nation-wide effort to restore fisheries habitat beyond what has been accomplished the past 30 years under Legislation such as the Clean Water Act. This document is the product of those discussions.

This subgroup recommends that the Sportfishing and Boating Partnership Council initiate a coordinated effort among the various stakeholders to develop consensus around a set of actions to enhance and restore fisheries habitat in the United States. These actions collectively would constitute a framework that will lead to improvement, enhancement, and conservation of fisheries habitat throughout the nation, impacting local to global fisheries resources. Below are the dimensions of, process for, and near-term objectives for developing such a framework during the following 12 months, culminating in June 2004.

Characteristics of the Framework:

1. It will concentrate primarily on the fisheries habitat resources of the United States, recognizing that Mexico and Canada share very important areas that contain habitats that are of importance to the United States. Those Nations will be involved when and where appropriate.
2. Fish will be the focal aquatic group. This direct a statement may elicit controversy, but a broader approach could make the issues less clear. It is understood that all aquatic resources benefit when fish habitat is improved; the final document must make this point clearly.
3. The initiative (framework) for action must have a geographic focus, be locally driven, scientifically based and supportive of landscape-level ecological principles and restoration activities. It is emphasized that the strategies supporting it must arise

at the local level and build toward a national effort, rather than be driven from the top. It must be value-added and not duplicative of ongoing efforts.

4. The process for developing the initiative (framework) for action, as well as the framework itself must unite all stakeholders—Federal, State, Tribal and local governments along with anglers, conservation groups and industry/municipalities—in a shared vision for fisheries habitat conservation.
5. The initiative (framework) will not require any new legislative authorities but enhance understanding and coordination of existing legislation.
6. The initiative (framework) will acknowledge that new funds are necessary for the long-term success of its actions/strategies. Lack of new funds should not be an excuse for not commencing work. Much can be done to capitalize on the successes of ongoing efforts to demonstrate the benefits of coordinated action. Early success will enhance the potential for new funds. It should be noted that an effort is currently underway to establish a modest source of funds to support fish habitat work. These funds would not be subject to new appropriations.
7. To be effective, the initiative (framework) should be based on solid conceptual models, such as joint-ventures, that outline potential strategies in the initiative (framework) that can be implemented by cooperating entities; it must establish biologically and socially reasonable benchmarks and be able to monitor progress toward mutually agreed-upon objectives; it must be dynamic and reflective of changing times and conditions; and it must contain evaluation, and communication, and accountability components.
8. The American Fisheries Habitat Initiative (Framework) for Action needs to have an oversight committee to address progress towards the overall goal and to provide guidance as changes are indicated to address issues as they arise.

Key components of the initiative (framework) for action:

1. Assessment of current partnership activities in defined geographic areas (joint ventures), encourage them, stimulate new joint ventures, and instigate work in important areas currently not represented in the initiative (framework).
2. Aggregate and build upon the needs and activities at the local level by assessment and identification of the top two or three key fisheries habitats that are in crises and need of restoration on a geographical basis, and support locally driven strategies to address those.
3. Provide a forum for communication, advocacy and support for the highest priority actions of the joint ventures.

4. Provide for formal recognition of successful habitat enhancement or restoration actions on a regular basis.
5. Coordinate and promote communication among the joint ventures to increase awareness of similar activities, new information, and innovative ideas and outcomes.
6. Assure that appropriate linkages are established between the initiative (framework) and other strategic efforts for fisheries such as the Coastal America effort, the Fishable Waters Act and the American Fisheries Society's Fisheries Habitat Plan.

Overall Goal and objectives to be achieved by June 2004:

GOAL

A shared common view among the stakeholders that the health of fisheries habitat is in jeopardy and the key to maintaining fish and aquatic wildlife populations in the future is increased emphasis on and action toward fisheries habitat restoration and conservation.

OBJECTIVE

By June 2004, launch an effort known as "The American Fisheries Habitat Initiative (Framework)" that sets forth actions designed to improve habitat for America's fisheries and related resources.

PROCESS

The initiative (framework) will be developed using the best thinking and efforts of the varied fisheries stakeholders, including Federal, state, tribal, non-governmental and local interests.

Necessary Steps:

- Achieve consensus among the stakeholders that the overall initiative (framework) for Action is necessary and useful.
- Identify stakeholders that would attend a series of regional forums designed to identify fisheries habitat crises and key actions and strategies to address those crises.
- Prepare a Document that expresses this consensus and outlines the major key efforts in the Initiative (Framework) for Action that are currently underway and those that need to be undertaken immediately.

Recommendation: Assuming the Council is requested to do so by the Fish and Wildlife Service, we recommend that in its meeting in June 2003 the Sport Fishing and Boating Partnership Council endorse the concepts expressed in this document and

establish a Steering Committee to develop the initiative (framework) for Action by carrying out the actions outlined here.