

NATIONAL FISHERIES HABITAT INITIATIVE

**Results of the National Stakeholder Meetings and
Recommendation to Proceed**

September 28, 2004

Introduction: The need to protect, restore and enhance aquatic habitats is greater than ever. Since 1900, 123 aquatic freshwater species have become extinct in North America. Some research shows North America's temperate freshwater ecosystems may be declining as quickly as tropical forest ecosystems. Of the 822 native freshwater fish species in the United States 39 percent are at risk of extinction. Estuaries provide habitat for more than 75 percent of America's commercial fish catch and 80 to 90 percent of the recreational fish catch, yet between 1992 and 1997, more than 32,600 acres of wetlands per year disappeared.

As of 2004, 227 aquatic species are listed as federally threatened or endangered: 21 amphibians, 115 fish, 70 bivalves and 21 crustaceans. In particular, the loss of native mollusks is alarming. Of the nearly 300 bivalve taxa found north of Mexico, 44 percent are extinct or endangered primarily due to the inundation of riffle habitat resulting from impoundment of major river systems. None of the listed aquatic species ever has been delisted.

In 2001, 34.1 million Americans at least 16 years old spent 557 million days fishing. Of the \$111 billion generated by the commercial and recreational fishing industry in 1997, 71 percent came from wetland-dependent species. In just the watersheds in the Charles River Basin, Massachusetts, the total benefits from flood damage protection, the amenity value of living close to a wetland, pollution reduction, and recreational values of hunting and fishing are worth \$95.5 million per year. New York City was able to save billions of dollars in wastewater treatment by purchasing lands in the upper watershed areas that purify the water naturally rather than installing new treatment plants. In addition to tangible benefits, a number of surveys show Americans are willing to pay substantial amounts for aquatic habitat and species conservation. For example, residents of Washington and Oregon reportedly would pay at least \$102 million per year for salmon recovery efforts.

Recognizing the need to protect aquatic habitat, the Sport Fishing and Boating Partnership Council (SFBPC) in its report *A Partnership Agenda for Fisheries Conservation*, published in 2002, recommended that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service take the lead in developing a National Fisheries Habitat Plan. A subgroup of the Council's Steering Committee developed a concept paper that outlined the framework for the plan. (See attached.) This paper described the possible structure and characteristics of a national coordinated effort to enhance and restore fisheries habitat in the United States. In August 2003, the Service responded by asking the Council to undertake a series of stakeholder meetings to assess the appropriateness, utility, practicality, and support for the concept. Also, the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (IAFWA) formally endorsed the idea of a North American Fish Habitat Plan at its annual meeting in September 2003.

During the past year, the Council responded to the Service's request by holding five formal stakeholder meetings as well as several *ad hoc* meetings with other groups to discuss the concept.

What the Stakeholders Said: More than 195 people representing 77 agencies and organizations signed in to discuss what has been called the **National Fish Habitat Initiative (NFHI)** during facilitated stakeholders meetings held from December 2003 through July 2004 in Kansas City, MO; Spokane, WA; Ocean City, MD; Nashville, TN; and Sun Valley, ID, and at the American Fisheries Society Administrators Section meeting in San Antonio, TX. A list of participating organizations, including 37 state agencies, eight federal agencies and 32 nongovernmental organizations is provided in the stakeholder meeting report (attached).

In addition, Council staff made presentations to administrators from several federal agencies, as well as at the following meetings: Native American Fish and Wildlife Society, the Coastal Society Conference and the Midwest Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Annual Meeting.

Stakeholders were informed before and after scoping meetings through use of:

- An electronic newsletter that summarized meetings, provided news about upcoming events, and thanked sponsors.
- An evaluation form given to participants after each meeting that gathered recommendations to improve meetings and to determine interest in further participation.
- The NFHI Website, <http://www.fishhabitat.org>, which currently catalogues all materials and events associated with NFHI's scoping and implementation.

Through invitation lists and inquiries, a contact data base of 379 people, representing 186 agencies and organizations, sorted by region and meeting participation, was used to distribute information throughout the scoping process. These names will form the initial database to assist in the NFHI concept development process by keeping this audience informed as a plan develops.

Several organizations expressed their strong interest in the NFHI by providing critical, tangible sources of support to the nationwide scoping effort. These organizations include the American Fisheries Society, Bass Anglers Sportsman's Society/ESPN Outdoors, Bass Pro Shops, International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (IAFWA), National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), Sport Fishing and Boating Partnership Council, Trout Unlimited, and the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Discussions at each of the stakeholder meetings were wide-ranging and informative and were centered on a number of questions designed to elicit dialogue about the advisability, benefits and feasibility of pursuing the NFHI. At each meeting, the response was unanimous: The NFHI is a concept that should be pursued and implemented as soon as possible.

Complementary to the stakeholders meetings, the SFBPC, FWS, NFWF, AFS, and Bass Pro Shops sponsored a symposium on developing the scientific basis for determining measures of success in the overall effort. This meeting was held in Madison, WI in conjunction with the American Fisheries Society (AFS) annual meeting. More than 140 individuals from many states and federal agencies attended this workshop (see attached report). The session was designed to begin the process of setting targets for fish habitat and determining how success would be measured.

Recommendations: In view of the stakeholder's consensus that declines in quality and quantity of fish habitat continue despite existing efforts, the Council presents the following recommendations to the Service and the IAFWA for consideration in developing a National Fish Habitat Plan.

1. **Develop the National Fish Habitat Plan.** The imperative is clear: Without concerted action by those who exercise authority over the nation's valuable fisheries resources, they will continue to decline. Consequently, the National Fish Habitat Plan should be developed without delay and should make clear the actions necessary for its success. The National Fish Habitat Plan should be landscape-scale, science-based, and partnership driven. It must involve those who affect and are affected by the fisheries resources of this country, and it must follow the general characteristics outlined in the Council's concept paper (attached). These include: concentration on fish habitat in the U.S.; focusing on fish; the need to be inclusive; the importance of targets; and the imperative for action.
2. **Assure that the highest levels of leadership within the principal agencies and organizations are involved.** The IAFWA should be the overall lead for development of the Plan. The Fish and Wildlife Service should continue to be the lead federal agency. However, it is critically important that agency leaders from those agencies with legal authority for managing fisheries resources play a pivotal role in development of the Plan. Although staff expertise in developing this important effort is important and necessary; the leaders of the relevant agencies must be engaged actively in the effort for it to be recognized as a priority.
3. **Be inclusive.** Preparation of the plan necessarily will involve a limited number of individuals. However, the advice of the widest array of individuals and agencies possible should be sought so valuable expertise and resources are not omitted from the planning process.
4. **Set targets.** The plan must contain clear objectives describing the needed changes in the quality and quantity of fish habitat. It also must identify funds and other resources required to attain those objectives. These elements are necessary to build a firm foundation for the Plan's success. This is an extremely difficult part of the process, and it was the subject of the recent scientific symposium held in Madison.

5. **Emphasize the voluntary, partnership-oriented nature of the effort.** In many respects, this plan will deal with water quantity and quality as key elements of fish habitat, issues that are long-associated with regulatory oversight. The plan must stress the voluntary, collaborative nature of the approach. A regulatory approach is not envisioned as part of this Plan.
6. **Develop an infrastructure.** A strong infrastructure with dedicated staff and funding is essential to the success of this effort, as has proven true in the development and implementation of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan.
7. **Communicate.** Outreach to stakeholders has raised expectations of many in the fisheries and aquatic resources communities. It is very important that this community receives regular communications about the process of developing the plan, as well as any preliminary indications of its content. For effective implementation, communication strategies must extend beyond the traditional fisheries community and its constituents to encompass other stakeholders whose decisions affect land and water use, as they relate to fish habitat.
8. **Continue Council involvement.** The SFBPC has been an important stimulus and catalyst for this effort. Continued Council participation and assistance in the development of the Plan will be important to its eventual success.

Conclusion: A wide diversity of interests within the fisheries community believes unanimously that it is time for a strong collaborative effort to protect and restore aquatic habitat. The continuing crisis with fish and aquatic habitats in the United States presents an imperative to develop and implement a National Fish Habitat Plan. The relevant agencies and organizations are ready, and the aquatic scientific community stands in support. A landscape-scale, science-based, partnership-driven effort is believed to be the most successful way to identify and accomplish actions necessary at the local level to improve fish habitat. Therefore, the above recommendations should be implemented as soon as possible.