

Draft Report on Habitat and Research Activities to Protect and Restore Chesapeake Bay Living Resources and Water Quality

A draft report fulfilling Section 202(g) of Executive Order 13508

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Success in protecting and restoring the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem will ultimately be measured by the vitality and richness of its living resources and the health and well being of the people who rely on them. People living along the Appalachian Mountains, the farmlands of the Delmarva Peninsula, and in our Nation's capital are all connected to and reliant on the goods and services provided by the Chesapeake Bay watershed. These ecosystem services include the fish, birds and other wildlife which make the Chesapeake Bay a National treasure. Over the years, lands draining to the Bay have been significantly affected by human activities that are compromising the ecological integrity and economic future of this national treasure. The Protect and Restore the Chesapeake Bay Executive Order provides an opportunity to take action by applying political and public will coupled with advanced technology and innovative science to address these detrimental impacts. Toward this end, this our report focuses on actions to raise the bar for habitat protection and restoration across all regions of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Our objectives and approach call for application of science and technologies to improve management decisions for habitats and living resources and the communities that depend on them:

- **Prioritize Actions to Maximize Ecological Benefits:** Identify outcomes for priority species and develop a watershed wide Spatial Management Plan to prioritize habitat protection and restoration actions in a way that maximizes benefit to critical living resources and water quality.

Actions:

- Develop a unified watershed-wide spatial map to drive integrated and proactive planning for the Bay and enable smarter decisions regarding ecological and economic tradeoffs.
 - Identify outcomes for priority species and use as guidance in placement of habitat protection and restoration projects.
 - Conduct an integrated ecosystem assessment including socioeconomic analysis to better engage people in sustaining the Bay.
- **Accelerate Habitat Protection and Restoration:** Target Federal resources toward establishing a network of terrestrial and aquatic protected areas and restoring the habitat gaps to link protected lands with open water.

Actions:

- Consider establishing aquatic protected areas and networking these areas with land-based preserves.

- Consider targeting Federal funding and technical assistance to conduct large scale habitat restoration for fish passage, wetlands, submerged aquatic vegetation, living shorelines, riparian buffers, uplands, forests, and streams.
 - Enforce permit compliance to protect the functions and values of wetlands and other waters and create greater regulatory predictability.
 - Support and implement National Fish Habitat Action Plan to promote the sustainability of Atlantic coast diadromous and other estuarine-dependent fishes and their essential habitats.
 - Consider establishment of a new inter-jurisdictional, Bay-wide regulatory body to implement the regulations and strategies necessary for managing and restoring Chesapeake Bay fisheries.
 - Conduct large scale oyster restoration through a new Bay-wide ecological strategy and incorporate oyster beds in living shoreline restoration projects.
 - Strengthen Clean Water Act, Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act and NOAA Memorandum of Agreement permit reviews to include specific requirements to compensate for all unavoidable losses of “waters of the United States.”
 - Support implementation of actions identified in State Wildlife Comprehensive Action Plans.

- **Coordinate Research and Assessment:** Conduct a unified, integrated ecosystem assessment that describes the health of the bay based on scientifically identified ecological indicators and socioeconomic analyses and monitor the ecological response of priority habitats by use of indicator species.
 - Actions:**
 - Develop a coordinated research and assessment strategy that will fully utilize and enhance existing research and capacity to conduct the science needed to support ecosystem-based management.
 - Support sustained, long-term, broad-scale, multispecies monitoring framework to inform decision-making for priority living resources and habitats.

These actions will demonstrate needed Federal leadership in implementing a true ecosystem based management approach that considers the interdependence of all aspects of the ecosystem, allows for public engagement, and is adaptive. Implementing larger-scale, more integrated habitat restoration and protection projects designed to benefit priority species is necessary to achieve the vision of a resilient and sustainable Chesapeake Bay ecosystem.