

Update on the Forage Fish New Agreement Outcome

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Habitat GIT Meeting

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Issue:

The current draft of the Chesapeake Bay Program's new Watershed Agreement contains a forage fish outcome under the Sustainable Fisheries goal: *"By 2016, develop a strategy for assessing the forage fish base available as food for predatory species in the Chesapeake Bay."* After the New Agreement is signed, the Fisheries GIT will have one year to develop a Management Strategy to address this outcome.

Background:

Forage species play an integral role in the Chesapeake Bay food web by supporting higher trophic level production. Except for menhaden, many forage species are not directly managed by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) or Chesapeake Bay jurisdictions, but these species are critical to sustaining economically valuable commercial and recreational fish species in the Bay. Better understanding of the forage base and predator-prey interactions involving these valuable species would be an important step toward ecosystem-based fisheries management in the Chesapeake Bay.

The Fisheries GIT Executive Committee and the Chesapeake Bay Program leadership recognize the importance of the New Agreement forage fish outcome. However, it was also made clear at the Fisheries GIT December 2013 meeting that much uncertainty surrounds this topic moving forward. Specifically, there is no clear definition of what the forage base consists of, what data already exists, where there are data gaps, how we can begin to quantify Chesapeake forage and how that information can be used in management decisions. Specifically, the Fisheries GIT discussed their scope of the forage base and how non-fish species should be considered like 1) benthic and invertebrate forage species and 2) other predators of forage species such as birds.

Current Status:

The Fisheries GIT has just submitted a proposal for a STAC-funded workshop to be titled *Assessing the Chesapeake Bay Forage Base: Existing Data and Research Priorities*. The proposed workshop would be held in late summer or early fall 2014. The workshop will identify: (1) forage groups of the Chesapeake Bay that are critical to assess for fisheries management; (2) existing data for these groups; (3) data gaps; and (4) strategies to improve the quantification of the forage base of this system. The workshop proposal and planning process is guided by a workshop Steering Committee comprised of forage experts, data experts, fisheries scientists, jurisdictional managers, and ASMFC representation.

Connection to Habitat GIT:

The Steering Committee for this workshop includes some Habitat GIT members: Nancy Butowski, Lee Karrh, and Tom Ihde as the Habitat GIT's STAC liaison. Mike Slattery, along with Peyton Robertson officially endorsed the workshop proposal as Chairs of the Habitat and Fisheries GITs respectively. The workshop Steering Committee and Fisheries GIT will be looking for the Habitat GIT's feedback and possible participation in the design and implementation of this proposed forage workshop.

It is assumed that many forage species rely on high-quality habitat in the Chesapeake Bay. The Fisheries GIT looks forward to potential collaboration opportunities with the Habitat GIT as the Bay Program works to better understand and quantify forage species in the Bay, and connect these species to specific locations and habitat types in the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem.