

**Executive Summary**  
**Oyster Restoration and Protection Plan for North Carolina: A Blueprint For Action**  
**Second Edition: 2008 – 2012**

The Eastern Oyster (*Crassostrea virginica*) is an ecological, economical and educational treasure for North Carolina. However, the oyster population has declined over 50 percent and it is now listed as a species of concern. This decline results from: habitat loss, pollution, diseases and historical harvest pressure. The health of the oyster reflects the health of the coastal ecosystem. For the past five years, efforts to protect and restore North Carolina's native oyster have increased significantly and annual oyster harvests have risen. A diverse group of stakeholders have worked in concert by linking strategies and developing targeted initiatives to create and implement the Oyster Restoration and Protection Plan for North Carolina: A Blueprint for Action (Blueprint). The Blueprint provided these stakeholders with the cohesive direction and guidance that allowed them to come together as a united force to pursue tangible restoration and protection strategies. The Blueprint enabled government, private agencies and other shellfish stakeholders to coordinate and link their habitat and water quality protection and restoration, and fishery management activities. This resulted in funding increases for oyster related protection and restoration programs that are about ten times higher than they were in 2003.

Now that a significant number of the objectives of the first action plan have been realized and new opportunities and challenges have presented themselves, a 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the Blueprint has been developed to establish a joint vision among the stakeholders for the next five years. The Blueprint is a living document that will be updated and amended by the steering committee. The following goals, objectives and action items represent the second five year cycle of the Blueprint.

**Blueprint's Overarching Goals:**

- To restore and protect North Carolina's native oyster populations and habitat in an effort to restore our estuaries to robust, diverse, & resilient ecosystems.
- To build broad public awareness & support for the value of oyster restoration, estuarine conservation and sustainable fisheries.
- To establish and work with a comprehensive coalition to build and maintain significant, demonstrable and meaningful progress towards oyster restoration in the next five years.

**Goal #1: Engage and lead a comprehensive coalition of partners on a state and federal level to achieve oyster and water quality protection and restoration objectives.**

- The Blueprint's Steering Committee will provide the leadership, agency vision, and broad based public support that will be needed to achieve the goals and objectives of the Blueprint.
- Prioritize and ensure implementation of key objectives and action items from the Blueprint, and update as needed.
- Hold biannual Shellfish Summits to review progress, adjust priorities and coordinate actions for the Blueprint's implementation.

**Goal #2: Protect and restore healthy oyster populations and habitat as a means to improve water quality, provide essential habitat, and support a sustainable fishery.**

- Complete and update the shellfish mapping initiative to determine priority areas for reef restoration, sanctuaries and shell plantings, Strategic Habitat Areas, and establish a fishery stock status for oysters in NC.
- Work with the regional workgroups to implement the recommended projects and actions for priority oyster growing areas and their watersheds
- Establish a consistent supply of shell and reef material by securing a reliable shell source and fully implementing the shell recycling program; maintaining adequate vessels and crew; and acquiring strategic stockpile sites so that 500,000 bushels of reef material are placed in sanctuaries and harvest areas statewide annually for restoration and fishery enhancement.
- Fully develop the remaining 160 acres of existing sanctuaries and establish five additional sanctuaries coastwide.
- Establish and fully develop the shellfish research hatchery program to: implement prioritized research needs; develop and provide a reliable source of native oyster seed; and determine the level of private and public shellfish hatchery production necessary for shellfish restoration and fishery enhancement efforts.

- Support a \$1 million annual Blue Crab and Shellfish Research Program, administered by North Carolina Sea Grant, to implement identified research priorities that will be used to help guide shellfish restoration and management.
- Reduce impacts to oyster habitat through, evaluation of threats, improved enforcement, establishment of protective buffers around habitats, and attain regulatory parity for the use of natural alternatives to preserve and/or restore estuarine shorelines.

**Goal #3: Protect and restore water quality throughout coastal waters and especially near areas designated as oyster habitat.**

- Implement the regional habitat and water quality recommendations for the identified high priority shellfish growing areas (SGAs) and their watersheds.
  - Southern Region: Shallotte and Lockwood Folly Rivers, Lower Cape Fear River, Masonboro Sound and Creeks, Topsail Sound area, Stump Sound and the New River.
  - Central Region: Queen’s Creek and White Oak River, Newport River, North River Area.
  - Northern Region: Lower Neuse River Area, Swan Quarter, Wysocking Bay, Jones Bay, and Middle Bay
- Prevent further degradation of shellfish waters through effective implementation and full enforcement of stormwater regulations, and by achieving regulatory parity between conventional development and Low Impact Development (LID) techniques.
- Utilize TMDLs and action plans in prioritized areas as successful strategies for cleaning up impaired shellfishing and swimming waters.
- Utilize the enhanced Shoreline Survey Methodology to complete updated surveys for all 55 SGAs, and share pollution data with land-use and water-quality agencies and municipalities to increase watershed level review of permits and enforcement.
- Ensure state land acquisition and conservation programs are adequately funded, and that these programs, recognize and prioritize shellfish waters protection and restoration.
- Secure support for the Community Conservation Assistance Program and other stormwater discharge identification, removal and retrofit programs so that a significant percentage of stormwater discharges are removed from shellfish waters.

**Goal #4: Develop a sustainable native oyster fishery.**

- Determine a sustainable level of oyster harvest incorporating a fishery stock status assessment, limits of wild harvest, and the potential and limits of oyster mariculture.
- Utilize the oyster hatchery program to provide support for shellfish growers through the development of private hatcheries and shellfish mariculture BMPs.
- Fully fund and support fishery grant programs.
- Utilize universities, community colleges, extension programs and other appropriate education programs to support a mariculture training/continuing education program as demand by prospective culturists dictates.
- Develop and utilize a marketing program to support shellfish growers, sustainable harvest methods and the conservation and restoration of North Carolina’s shellfish.

**Goal #5: Increase public awareness of the ecological and economic roles, values and importance of a healthy oyster population, and expand citizen and stakeholder support and participation efforts to protect and restore water quality and oyster habitat.**

- Provide increased opportunities for student, teacher and public participation in shell recycling, shellfish protection and restoration activities.
- Create and maintain a comprehensive network of shellfish education and training resources, materials and opportunities available to students, teachers, and the public.
- Utilize educational institutions and public oyster forums to develop and disseminate educational resources and to train teachers to engage the public, policy makers and stakeholders in efforts to protect and restore oysters and shellfish waters in North Carolina.

The organizations listed below are just a few of those involved with the Oyster Blueprint. Many others serve as active participants including shellfish growers and harvesters and members of the public.

