

OUR COAST

Working Together for a Healthy Coast

Restoration, Recycling, Resilience



Executive Director Letter

I wanted to take a moment to share with you the incredible individuals and organizations honored as the Coastal Federation's 2025 Pelican Award winners. On Sept. 20, the Federation proudly presented the awards, recognizing those who exemplify coastal stewardship. These awards celebrate people who dedicate their time, skills, and energy to help protect and restore the coast, inspire others, and create lasting impact.

In the Northeast Coastal Region, Donnie Sellers was recognized for his volunteer work in oyster restoration, shell recycling, and coastal cleanups. Leonard "Len" Schmitz was awarded for his work in expanding the Recycle for Reefs program and engaging community members in recycling. Superintendent David Hallac of Cape Hatteras National Seashore and the Outer Banks Group was recognized for his visionary leadership in addressing beach erosion, debris, and threatened structures, while building strong community partnerships.

In the Central Coastal Region, the Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail was recognized for helping the Federation secure 783 acres at North River Wetlands Preserve, expanding restoration opportunities and improving public access. Jessica Guilianelli, Natural and Cultural Resources Manager at MCAS Cherry Point, was recognized for leading a major living shoreline project on base to stabilize erosion and showcase innovative shoreline management approaches. NOAA research project inaugural graduates Lauren Johnson and Tamarr Moore were recognized for fostering future coastal professionals through research, leadership, and mentorship.

In the Southeast Coastal Region, We the Water was celebrated for completing a 340-mile outrigger canoe journey, raising over \$50,000, and inspiring statewide coastal advocacy. Volunteer Alan Cradick was recognized for his time and talent in capturing our restoration efforts through photography. Feletia Lee and Anna Reh-Gingerich were recognized for their leadership in implementing stormwater reduction projects to keep millions of gallons of polluted runoff out of Bradley Creek.

Statewide awards were presented to the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries' Habitat Enhancement Section for 25 years of oyster reef restoration and work to create 423 acres of sanctuary reef. In addition, Worth Creech was honored for advancing oyster shell recycling programs and building community partnerships. The Kenan Fellows Program for Teacher Leadership was also celebrated for connecting educators with coastal science opportunities to cultivate the next generation of coastal stewards. John Harris was awarded for his long-term, gracious legal and expert assistance in helping the Federation conserve nearly 15,000 acres of coastal lands.

Lifetime achievement awards went to David Cignotti, for his decades of service and enduring dedication to the coast, and to Dr. Hans W. Paerl, for his lifelong career advancing water quality science, harmful algal bloom research, and coastal policy.

These awardees demonstrate that protecting our coast is a shared effort. Their leadership, volunteerism, innovation, and dedication inspire all of us, whether through recycling shells, volunteering, advocating for clean water, or supporting restoration projects. Together, we continue to build a resilient coast for today and future generations.




-Executive Director
Braxton Davis

Read More About Our Winners Here



<https://www.nccoast.org/2025/09/meet-the-winners/>

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*Check out the back cover
for our holiday giving guide!*

This Edition was Published by:
The North Carolina Coastal Federation

Editor:
Stacia Strong

Designer:
Lauren Colonair

Contributing Writers:
Coastal Federation Staff contributed content
for this edition of the Our Coast

Contributing Photographers:
Shelia Tinkman | WithersRavenel
Native Shorlines | Doug Racine
Coastal Federation Staff

Cover Photo:
Daniel Pullen

nccf@nccoast.org | www.nccoast.org

Headquarters: 3609 NC 24 (Ocean)

Newport, NC 28570 | ph: 252-393-8185

Northeast Satellite Office: 637 Harbor Road

P.O. Box 276 Wanchese, NC 27981

ph: 252-473-1607

Southeast Satellite Office: 309 W. Salisbury St.

Wrightsville Beach, NC 28480

ph: 910-509-2838

Working Together We've...

Filtered
Billions of gallons
of water

Restored
15,000 acres
of wetlands

Recycled
33,131 Bushels
of oyster shells

Removed
4.3 million pounds
of marine debris

WATER QUALITY



Restoring the Chowan

Restoring clean water and tackling farm runoff are at the heart of an effort in the Chowan River watershed, which has been identified as a priority area under the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service through its National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI). Right now, the Coastal Federation is leading the development of a planning-phase watershed assessment to inform future conservation actions, identify funding opportunities, and reduce agricultural sources of water pollution, such as nutrients and sediment.

The Chowan River is a coastal watershed spanning Virginia and North Carolina, and it has a history of nutrient-driven water quality problems. Excess nitrogen and phosphorus from agriculture and other sources have caused nuisance algal blooms since the 1970s. Major blooms were documented in 1972 and 1978, prompting North Carolina to designate the Chowan as Nutrient Sensitive Waters and implement nutrient controls. These measures, such as upgrading wastewater treatment and implementing best management practices on farms, initially reduced nutrient loads and algal blooms from the 1980s through the 2000s.

In recent years, however, algal blooms have resurged - including potentially harmful cyanobacteria blooms, indicating that nutrient inputs remain a critical issue. In North Carolina, the watershed's land use is a mix of forest, agriculture, and wetlands, with extensive drainage networks connecting these lands to the river. Reducing nutrients, particularly nitrogen, from agricultural and forestry activities is essential to protect the Chowan River's water quality and ecology.

"Restoring the Chowan River isn't just an environmental goal—it's an investment in clean water, resilient farms, and healthy communities that depend on this watershed every day," explained Coastal Advocate Alyson Flynn.

Starting this year and continuing through the spring of 2026, the Federation is developing a comprehensive overview of the physical, ecological, and socioeconomic factors that affect water quality in the Chowan River watershed. This work includes assessing and characterizing watershed conditions, analyzing hydrology and water quality data, mapping critical nutrient sources, recommending best management practices with cost estimates, and creating an outreach plan to engage local partners.

Over the past year, the Federation has met individually with agency partners, field representatives, and researchers to better understand producer participation in the watershed and collect data on land uses and top conservation practices. Using this information, the team has begun mapping and modeling the current and anticipated levels of treatment, and producing preliminary estimates for inclusion in the watershed assessment. In September, the Federation hosted an in-person meeting in downtown Edenton with local partners and producers to share the draft assessment, gather feedback, and coordinate existing outreach efforts in the region.

This fall, after incorporating partner input, the Federation will finalize its implementation strategies, site priorities, and outreach plans, including participation in local events and festivals. The full NWQI assessment is anticipated to be complete by March 2026, after which NRCS will review it and incorporate the identified projects into future NWQI budget allocations.



Give with Confidence

The Coastal Federation is a top-rated charity nationwide for fiscal transparency and financial stewardship, according to both Charity Navigator and GuideStar.

SALT MARSH



Resilience at Cherry Point

Commissioned in 1942, Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Cherry Point, located in Havelock, North Carolina, has served as a vital hub for Marine Corps aviation for more than 80 years. The installation spans approximately 11,600 acres and is bounded by over 16 miles of shoreline. The Cherry Point community includes more than 38,000 individuals, comprised of active-duty and retired Marines, civilian personnel, and their families.

Environmental studies conducted by MCAS Cherry Point indicate that the Neuse River shoreline has experienced significant erosion, with over 100 feet of retreat in some areas since 1994. Following the severe impacts of Hurricane Florence in 2018, the Air Station faced accelerating shoreline loss and failing bulkheads, putting recreational facilities, housing, training spaces, and operational readiness at risk.

In many locations, existing infrastructure would not allow for the removal of the hardened structures. In those locations, the bulkheads were repaired. To further extend the lifespan of these structures, the Air Station began working to design and construct around 12,000 linear feet of living shoreline to reduce wave energy and begin to restore the shoreline. Unlike bulkheads, living shorelines use native vegetation and natural materials to reduce wave energy and stabilize the shoreline, allowing it to recover naturally.

“While the removal of hardened structures would have been ideal, it was just not feasible for this area. A hybrid approach that would minimize maintenance costs for our bulkheads and restore habitat in the Neuse River quickly became the ideal solution to our problem,” stated MCAS Cherry Point Natural Resources Manager Jessica Guilianelli.

A contract was awarded by the Air Station to construct 9,700 linear feet of living shoreline, and an additional 2,029 feet was constructed in cooperation with the North Carolina Coastal Federation through grants secured from the North Carolina Land and Water Fund and the Department of Defense Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Program, administered through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. The entire shoreline will be planted with 130,000 native marsh plants by the end of the year.

MCAS Cherry Point’s decision to include living shorelines in its restoration design is an example of how military installations can align mission readiness with natural resource protection. “One of the key benefits of living shorelines is their ability to grow and strengthen over time,” said April Hall, Coastal Resiliency Planner and Manager at the North Carolina Coastal Federation. “As sediment gradually accumulates behind the structure, the shoreline becomes more stable each year, creating a resilient buffer against erosion and storm impacts. At the same time, the area transforms into a thriving habitat for fish, crabs, birds, and other wildlife, restoring ecological function while protecting the shoreline.”

Hall added, “It will be exciting to watch the shoreline at MCAS Cherry Point evolve, becoming an increasingly vibrant and resilient coastal habitat.”



Leave a Legacy for the Coast

Including the Federation in your will or estate plans is a simple way to ensure a healthy coast for the next generation. Visit nccoast.org/give.



OYSTERS



"This initiative requires a collective effort, encompassing various elements such as public awareness, community outreach, educational programs, convenient access to public drop-off locations, and dedicated support from staff, volunteers, and contractors," said Blakey.

This fall, the Federation launched a shell recycling request process for oyster roast events. The form is intended for organizers of events such as oyster roasts, festivals, and community gatherings where oysters are served.

[Scan Here](#)



www.nccoast.org/oyster-roast-event-recycling-request/

Recycling for Reefs

The Coastal Federation is working to restore wild oyster populations by recycling oyster shells and putting those shells back into the water. It's a critical step in ensuring that North Carolina's coastal ecology and economy continue to thrive.

The Federation currently manages 30 public oyster shell recycling drop-off sites. Additionally, the Federation has partnered with 31 restaurants and seafood markets to collect their oyster shells as part of the Recycle for Reefs shell recycling program.

Over the past five years, the Federation and its partners have collected more than 26,908 bushels of oyster shells. Those shells have been used in numerous restoration projects, including oyster patch reefs at the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge, as well as multiple efforts led by the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries.

"Collecting shells from restaurants, transporting them to a public drop-off site, and curing them for six months requires significant effort," explained Coastal Specialist and Oyster Shell Recycling team lead Victoria Blakey. "However, the most rewarding aspect of this process is returning the shells to the water to enhance existing oyster reefs or build new ones."

But the work to collect shells for restoration projects is far from over. An extensive assessment by the Federation's oyster team discovered that only 6% of oyster shells produced in North Carolina are actually recycled, even though it is illegal to dispose of oyster shells in landfills or to use them as mulch for landscaping because of how valuable they are to restoration efforts.



Many Ways to Give!

Explore all the ways you can support the coast, from becoming a sustainer to giving through IRAs or Donor Advised Funds, or by donating stock. Visit nccoast.org/give.



MARINE DEBRIS



ADV Work Continues Along the Coast

This summer, the Coastal Federation, along with several other organizations across six states, Guam, and areas of the U.S. Virgin Islands, is working through the BoatUS Foundation for Boating Safety and Clean Water to remove more than 300 abandoned and derelict vessels (ADV).

With funding from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Federation plans to remove an additional 12-14 commercial and recreational vessels from coastal waters at eight sites, extending from New Hanover County northward into Chowan County.

"Thanks to this additional support, we will be able to work with towns like Carolina Beach and commercial fishing communities like Sneads Ferry and Swan Quarter to remove derelict vessels from working harbors," explained Marine Debris Program Director Ted Wilgis.

Preventing and removing abandoned vessels is an integral part of the Federation's work and the NC Marine Debris Action Plan to ensure a coast that is free of marine debris. Abandoned and derelict vessels can pose environmental threats by damaging salt marshes, oyster reefs, and other critical habitats while leaching hazardous materials into the water. They can also affect local tourism and recreational economies by becoming navigation hazards to boaters and deterrents to people using the waterways.

Since 2021, the Federation has worked with over 10 local contractors to remove 169 vessels from coastal waters and plans to remove an additional 20 by the end of 2025

"The unprecedented removal of over 400 ADVs from coastal waters since Hurricane Florence is only possible through the partnership and support of the NC Wildlife Resources Commission, local governments, the NC Division of Coastal Management, the NC General Assembly, and the NOAA Marine Debris Program," explained Wilgis.

Along with the removal and disposal of ADVs, the BoatUS Foundation for Boating Safety and Clean Water is working with coastal states and other partners to establish a national database for tracking ADVs. Locally, the Federation is working with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC), the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality (NCDEQ), the North Carolina Division of Coastal Management (NCDQM), local governments, and area legislators to update rules and regulations for ADVs to provide more prevention tools aimed at reducing their occurrence during non-storm periods. Fines and criminal penalties enable agencies and partners to both work with owners and to proactively prevent vessels from becoming ADVs and sinking.

While the Federation and its partners continue to locate and remove these vessels, we also need the public's help in reporting potential abandoned and derelict vessels, as well as other harmful marine debris. The Federation has created an easy reporting tool that allows you to send photos and the location of any major marine debris you may come across.

You can find our reporting tool at nccoast.org/marinedebris or by scanning the QR code below.



Show Your Love for the Coast!

Show your love for the coast from the road with the Federation's specialty license plate, which supports the coast with a \$20 donation per plate. Visit nccoast.org/give.



COASTAL MANAGEMENT & EDUCATION



Threatened Oceanfront Structures

Erosion and stronger storms have caused at least 18 home collapses on the Rodanthe oceanfront since 2020, with dozens more structures at risk. Most recently, on Aug. 22, following impacts from Hurricane Erin, Dare County reported damage to 81 residential structures between the Rodanthe and Buxton oceanfront (Rodanthe: 21; Buxton: 60). Although officials have not yet provided final counts of impacted or compromised septic systems from this event, they have issued warnings of public health risks from leaking and exposed drain fields caused by severe erosion and storm surge.

Damaged and exposed septic systems frequently release untreated waste, creating serious environmental and public health hazards. Under current oceanfront rules, property owners often repair or replace septic systems to regain their certificate of occupancy. This enables structures to remain in a vulnerable condition until they eventually collapse.

Previously, the state's Coastal Resources Commission (CRC) drafted rule changes requiring permits, stricter siting, and clearer standards to keep septic systems off vulnerable oceanfront areas. On March 15, 2023, the proposed changes were approved for public comment by the Commission and published in the North Carolina Register. However, the rules stalled in the rulemaking process and now must return to the Commission for discussion and reconsideration in order to proceed.

At the August CRC Meeting in New Bern, the Federation successfully urged the commission to revisit the previously proposed policy changes to rules on septic tank placement along the oceanfront. Such rules would: (1) clearly require a permit for replacing existing septic tanks in ocean hazard areas so they are not treated as exempt repairs, and (2) prohibit septic tanks on the active sandy beaches. These rules are critical to safeguarding public health, protecting public trust rights, and maintaining the long-term health of our oceanfront.

Thanks to the Federation's continued advocacy, the Commission has agreed to revisit these long-stalled rules in the coming months.

Education on the Coast

Recently, our Education and Outreach Director, Sara Hallas-Hemilright, welcomed over 35 teachers to our Wanchese office as part of a professional development program with the STEM East Network. This initiative focuses on real-world STEM learning tied to local careers. During their visit, teachers explored our programs and potential maritime careers, guided by Sara through our teaching resources, including the Distance Learning Lab. They also learned about Aquaculture and oyster biology by meeting a local oyster grower.

This summer, Coastal Education Coordinator Rachel Bisesi, along with leaders from the Boys & Girls Club of the Coastal Plains, hosted the third annual Coastal STEM Career Fair. Four Boys & Girls Teen Centers and marine science campers from Carteret Community College attended, discovering new coastal job opportunities.

Additionally, Bonnie Mitchell, our Coastal Education Coordinator in the southeast office, hosted students and families from the Cyprus Friendship Program. Participants explored the estuary, conducted a marine debris cleanup, and learned about nature-based solutions to local coastal challenges. This experience provided valuable insights into community-driven restoration and water protection.



NEW! Celebrate a birthday or special event with our new build-your-own birthday fundraiser. Celebrate your way while supporting the coast! Visit nccoast.org/give.





North Carolina Coastal Federation

Working Together for a Healthy Coast

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Support the Coast During this Season of Giving!

We are incredibly grateful for the generous support of all the people and partners who make up our Federation family. We are a grassroots, member-supported organization that relies on support like yours. If you are looking for ways to give this holiday season, consider some of these options:

- **VISIT OUR HOLIDAY GIFT SHOP:** (starting Dec 1): nccoast.org/shop
- **GIVE A GIFT MEMBERSHIP:** (including a new special gift!): nccoast.org/giftmember
- **ADOPT AN OYSTER:** Give oysters a bright future and enjoy fun benefits: nccoast.org/myoyster
- **BECOME A SUSTAINER:** Show your commitment to the coast: nccoast.org/sustainer

GIVE WITH CONFIDENCE:

The Coastal Federation was recently awarded our eleventh consecutive four-star rating by Charity Navigator for outstanding fiscal transparency and stewardship.

