

OUR COAST

Working Together for a Healthy Coast

The 2026 Roadmap



Executive Director Letter

As we step into a new year, I find myself reflecting with true gratitude for everything we accomplished together in 2025. The impacts can be measured in acres of restored wetlands and oyster reefs, tallied by the tons of debris removed, and seen in the reactions of those learning about the values of our coast.

This past year, we made major strides in improving water quality and reducing polluted runoff. Thanks to strong partnerships and innovative thinking, we advanced watershed plans, put new stormwater projects in the ground, and opened doors to even more restoration work ahead. Whether it was capturing tens of thousands of gallons of rainwater before it reaches our waterways or restoring the natural flow of water through wetlands, these projects are already making a difference for our coastal creeks, rivers, sounds and communities.

Our shoreline and salt marsh work continued to expand as we built major new living shorelines, planted hundreds of thousands of native marsh grasses, and helped coastal property owners create natural solutions to protect their property while strengthening the health of our estuaries. And we helped coastal communities with plans for future resilience projects that will benefit those most vulnerable to flooding and storms.

2025 was also a strong year for oysters. Together with partners and volunteers, we added significant new acreage to the State's oyster sanctuary network, recycled thousands of bushels of shell, and advanced the design and permitting of the new Mariculture Hub. Our new oyster exhibit at the NC Aquarium on Roanoke Island was unveiled late this year, and it is already reaching thousands of visitors.

Our marine debris efforts continued, last year, at full speed, with commercial fishing crews and staff removing hundreds of tons of debris, including derelict vessels and lost fishing gear. In 2025, we also updated the Marine Debris Action Plan and created a guidebook for designing and constructing more resilient docks and piers.

This year also required great focus on our advocacy efforts. We elevated community concerns about major coastal development proposals, pushed for stronger wetland protections, and informed efforts to ensure North Carolina remained excluded from the draft federal offshore drilling plan.

Finally, our education team continued inspiring the next generation of coastal stewards. Thousands of K-12 students, college students, and adults engaged with us through field work, workshops, internships, and community events, and our award-winning Coastal Review reached over 1 million readers for the first time during a 12-month period.

Looking back, 2025 showed what we can achieve when we work together—locally, regionally, and statewide—to protect and restore our coast. Looking ahead, 2026 offers even more opportunity: to deepen our partnerships, expand community-led projects, and continue our collaborative efforts.

Thank you for your support, your trust, and your belief in this work. Together, we are building a healthier coast for generations to come.



With Gratitude,
Braxton
Braxton Davis
-Executive Director

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Working Together We've...

Filtered
Billions of gallons
of water

Restored
15,000 acres
of wetlands

Recycled
42,131 Bushels
of oyster shells

Removed
4.7 million pounds
of marine debris

WATER QUALITY



Goal: Enhance Coastal Water Quality & Reduce Flooding

Intense rainstorms lead to flooding and a decline in water quality as runoff carries pollutants into our coastal waters. The effects are worsened by altered landscapes that direct rainwater into streets, ditches, and storm drains instead of allowing it to soak into the ground. Lowering the amount of stormwater runoff is essential for reducing flooding and improving coastal water quality.

Healthy coastal waters support our economy and ecosystems, and we rely on them for work and recreation. That's why water quality remains a top priority for the Coastal Federation.

In 2025, the Federation made great strides toward this goal through a number of initiatives, including the following accomplishments:

- Completed two stormwater retrofits in Wilmington that collectively capture up to 25,000 gallons of stormwater runoff during each rain event.
- Completed three field test retrofits of complex stormwater systems; these projects will help guide the design of a stormwater permit retrofit cost-share program that will launch in 2026.
- Installed the first pump at the Lux Farms restoration project in Hyde County, an effort that's been more than a decade in the making. The system will divert water from cropland ditches through restored wetlands rather than discharging directly into Pamlico Sound.

- Completed construction and planting at the 1-acre Salt Marsh Nursery at North River Wetlands Preserve, a first-of-its-kind regenerative nursery that will help supply salt marsh plants for future restoration projects along the coast.

As we look to 2026, the Federation's Water Quality team will build upon the momentum generated in many of the watersheds and project areas over the past year. The Federation will continue its partnership with the City of Wilmington to construct a stormwater wetland this year in the Hewletts Creek watershed.

Now that the first three field-test retrofits are complete for the Coastal Stormwater Solutions Program, work will continue by funding an estimated 10 to 15 new retrofit projects across the coast.

We will also continue to work with partners in Hyde County to complete the Lux Farms project and advance the Lake Mattamuskeet Regional Conservation Partnership Program toward implementation.

On the Newport River, construction is expected to begin this year on Phase I of work to restore nearly 3,000 acres of land that will hold back millions of gallons of water every year. Last year, staff collaborated with community members to plan for public access at the future Newport River Preserve. The Federation remains committed to protecting coastal waters through these efforts and others, including land acquisition and restoration.



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



- Constructed 43 living shorelines through the Living Shoreline Cost-Share Program, totaling more than 5,174 linear feet and utilizing nearly 23,000 salt marsh grasses.
- Partnered with five underserved communities to co-develop nature-based resilience solutions.
- Hosted a Carbon Flux Research workshop over the summer, bringing together over 46 partners to help develop research and monitoring recommendations.

Throughout 2026, the Salt Marsh team will continue to focus efforts on implementing the Salt Marsh Action Plan, the Living Shoreline Cost-Share Program, advancing additional large-scale restoration projects, including additional work at Jockey's Ridge State Park and the Swan Quarter Harbor, as well as implementing projects funded through an EPA Carbon Pollution Reduction Grant. Through this grant, we are also excited to collaborate on cutting-edge research exploring lateral carbon flux, which is the movement of carbon across landscapes and ecosystems, to deepen our understanding of how wetland restoration drives carbon benefits.

Goal: Protect and Restore Salt Marshes to Foster Thriving Human and Natural Coastal Communities

Boasting one of the largest and most productive estuarine systems in the United States, North Carolina is home to around 220,000 acres of salt marshes. These marshes provide invaluable habitat for fish, improve water quality, and protect coastal communities from flooding. In addition, healthy marshes store large amounts of carbon, holding back its release into the atmosphere and aiding in climate resiliency.

Last year, the Federation's Salt Marsh team worked with numerous partners to complete several major living shoreline projects, including projects at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, the North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores, on Jones Island, and at the Swan Quarter Harbor. Across these efforts, the team achieved the following outcomes:

- Completed four large-scale living shoreline projects totaling 5,958 linear feet.
- Planted more than 156,200 salt marsh grasses at 10 different sites.



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



Goal: Ensure an Abundance of Oysters that Support the Environment and Economy

North Carolina's native eastern oyster (*Crassostrea virginica*) is one of the most important species in our estuaries. Oysters benefit North Carolina's coastal ecology and economy. These benefits can be summarized as the three "Fs" for short: food, filter, and fish habitat. Oysters can filter up to 50 gallons of water a day, provide healthy food for humans, and create reef habitats that support fish and other marine life. These benefits, in turn, support jobs and provide economic opportunities for coastal communities.

In 2025, the Federation's Oyster team worked tirelessly to expand oyster shell recycling efforts, bringing on new partners in the Raleigh and Wake County area and forging new coastal partnerships between restaurants joining the Restaurant to Reef efforts and new public drop-off sites. The team also made progress in the following areas:

- Constructed an additional 47 acres of oyster sanctuary reefs at Maw Point and Brant Island in Pamlico Sound. These two sites now total 104 acres of the 120-acre planned reef sites.
- Recycled 9,000 bushels of oyster shells through 30 public drop-off sites and 28 participating restaurants and seafood markets.
- Made significant progress in the permitting and design of the new Aquaculture Hub in Carteret County (site work has now begun!)

- Partnered with the North Carolina Aquarium at Roanoke Island to design and fund a new Oyster Exhibit that showcases the ecological and economic importance of oysters and will be engaged with by thousands of visitors each year.

This year, the Oyster team will complete construction and open the Aquaculture Hub in Carteret County that will provide growers with access to water, refrigeration, and workspace - addressing a long-standing industry need and helping to grow North Carolina's shellfish economy.

Construction of at least 15 acres of oyster sanctuary is also anticipated to be completed this year, and the Oyster team will look to continue to expand oyster shell recycling efforts. Additional priorities include collaborating with shellfish farmers in the northeast region to lay cultch on leases to create natural oyster reefs, building small-scale reefs in Roanoke Sound, and advancing design and funding efforts for an Oyster Pathway initiative in the southeast region that will connect restoration, education, and community engagement.

Beginning this year, the Oyster team will be led by Alyson Flynn, who has spent the last four years with the Federation as an Environmental Economist and Coastal Advocate. In the Oyster Program Director role, Alyson brings a data-driven, partnership-focused approach to advancing oyster restoration and aquaculture, building on her experience securing funding, leading large-scale restoration efforts, and demonstrating the economic return of investing in oysters. She looks forward to continuing to grow with the Federation while strengthening the Oyster Program's impact for North Carolina's coastal ecosystems and communities.



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



- Released the newest edition of the N.C. Marine Debris Action Plan that outlines statewide partnerships and ongoing initiatives for the next five years.
- Published a Docks and Piers design and construction guide to help coastal residents build more resilient waterfront structures.

This year, the Marine Debris team will look to build upon those efforts by continuing to work with local commercial fishers to remove 350 tons (about 700,000 pounds) of marine debris along the coast. We'll also continue the Lost Fishing Gear Recovery Project to remove another 2,250 pieces of lost fishing gear, and work with contractors and other partners to pull 25 abandoned and derelict vessels from coastal waters.

We will also follow up with legislators to formalize the adoption of an ADV Program for North Carolina and work with local governments to reduce debris generated from residential docks and piers.

Goal: Ensure the Coast is Free of Marine Debris

Marine debris is often the result of storm-damaged docks, houses, and yards; lost fishing gear; poorly managed construction sites; abandoned boats; plastics contained in wastewater and stormwater discharges; and careless littering. The Coastal Federation is dedicated to working alongside local, state, and federal agencies to reduce the amount of debris that enters our coastal waterways.

In 2025, the Federation's Marine Debris team made significant progress in efforts to reduce marine debris. With the help of 50 commercial fishers and contractors, the Federation has now removed 4.7 million pounds of debris from coastal waters since 2019. This year, the team has:

- Collected and removed 290 tons (about 580,000 pounds) of large-scale marine debris, such as lumber, floating docks, and construction materials.
- Removed 2,250 pieces of lost fishing gear, including crab pots and oyster cages.
- Removed eight abandoned and derelict vessels (ADV) from coastal waters that weighed a total of 715 tons (1.43 million pounds).



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.



EDUCATION & COASTAL MANAGEMENT



Coastal Management

The work of the Federation's **Coastal Management team** is deeply intertwined with and supports our efforts to maintain clean coastal waters, thriving salt marshes and shorelines, abundant oysters, and a coast free from marine debris. The team works closely with diverse partners to engage them in sound, science-based coastal management decisions.

In 2025, our Coastal Management team worked both behind the scenes and on the front lines to protect our coast. They brought transparency to major beach projects, tackled issues associated with beach erosion, at-risk oceanfront homes, and contamination concerns, pushed for stronger wetland protections, and advanced legislation to safeguard the coast.

This year, the team will build on this momentum by advocating for stronger state and federal wetland protections, opposing coastal development where it harms coastal resources, and expanding resilient infrastructure initiatives that blend natural and engineered solutions. We are closely collaborating with partners on the Wilmington Port expansion to oppose a costly, environmentally damaging dredging project that could permanently alter the Lower Cape Fear. We will also follow up with legislators to formalize the adoption of an Abandoned and Derelict Vessel Program for North Carolina. Through these efforts, we will continue to defend public access, advance science-based management, and strengthen the long-term resilience and economic vitality of North Carolina's coast.



Education

The Federation's **Education team** brings the science of the coast to life through hands-on learning experiences, community presentations, volunteer events, and so much more. We aim to help students and community members develop a deeper understanding of our coastal environment and an appreciation for the importance of protecting and preserving these vital areas.

In 2025, educators worked with dozens of groups up and down the coast, including:

- Hands-on programs with 4,141 K-12 and college students.
- Over 30 restoration, stewardship, and cleanup events with 529 volunteers.
- Work with 7,606 adults and community members (including 110 teachers) through partnerships, internships, workshops, cleanups, and community events.

Throughout 2026, the Education team will expand hands-on learning and community engagement to advance clean water, habitat restoration, and coastal resilience. The team will deliver 24 Creating Coastal Stewards programs to approximately 250 students and volunteers, many from underserved communities, and lead rain garden and nature-based stormwater projects along the coast. Education on living shorelines and wetlands will grow through volunteer planting and monitoring events and support for the Salt Marsh Action Plan. Oyster education and recycling efforts will expand through K-12 and college partnerships, community oyster events, and promotion of public shell drop-off sites. Marine debris education will focus on implementing the Marine Debris Action Plan, supporting large-scale debris and abandoned and derelict vessel removal, and leading volunteer cleanups at sentinel sites. Coastal management outreach will include Ask an Advocate sessions and promotion of resilient docks, wetland protection, and mariculture growth.

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

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