



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission NEWS RELEASE

Vision: Sustainably Managing Atlantic Coastal Fisheries

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ASMFC Habitat Committee Revisits 20-Year Policy on Submerged Aquatic Vegetation

Arlington, VA – In honor of the 20-year anniversary of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission’s (Commission) Policy on Submerged Aquatic Vegetation (SAV), the Commission’s Habitat Committee conducted a thorough review of the policy, re-evaluating its recommendations and importance. Upon review, it was determined that the policy is still relevant and, arguably, more important now than ever. SAV continues to be vital to many Commission-managed fish species, and is afforded different degrees of protection up and down the coast.

SAV comprise some of the most productive ecosystems in the world. According to the Blue Carbon Initiative, SAV covers 43.7 – 148 million acres worldwide. This is only 0.2% of the ocean floor, yet SAV binds approximately 10% of carbon (as sediments) each year. In fact, they’re twice as effective at storing carbon as terrestrial forests by acre. SAV roots also stabilize sediments and absorb excess nutrients. Their stabilizing properties reduce shoreline erosion, benefitting not only estuarine communities, but coastal property owners. SAV also improves water quality and provides food and habitat for many species, especially juveniles. Overall, SAV contributes to healthy fisheries and ecosystems. Unfortunately, SAV is one of the most rapidly declining habitats around the world, with up to a 7% loss in area annually due to human activities.



Spotted seatrout and SAV. Photo © Kent Smith, FL FWC

In 1997, the Commission’s Habitat Committee developed a policy to communicate the need for conservation of coastal SAV resources, and to highlight state and Commission-based activities for implementation of a coastal SAV conservation and enhancement program. The

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission was formed by the 15 Atlantic coastal states in 1942 for the promotion and protection of coastal fishery resources. The Commission serves as a deliberative body of the Atlantic coastal states, coordinating the conservation and management of nearshore fishery resources, including marine, shell and diadromous species.

Commission encouraged implementation of this policy by state, federal, local, and cooperative programs that influence and regulate fish habitat and activities impacting fish habitat, specifically SAV.

In updating the policy, the Habitat Committee left the goals largely unchanged from the 1997 version. The primary goal is to preserve, conserve, and restore SAV where possible, in order to achieve a net gain in distribution and abundance along the Atlantic coast and in tidal tributaries, and to prevent any further losses of SAV in individual states by encouraging the following:

1. Protect existing SAV beds from further losses due to degradation of water quality, physical destruction to the plants, or disruption to the local benthic environment;
2. Continue to promote state or regional water and habitat quality objectives that will result in restoration of SAV through natural re-vegetation;
3. Continue to promote, develop, attain, and update, as needed, state SAV restoration goals in terms of acreage, abundance, and species diversity, considering historical distribution records and estimates of potential habitat.
4. Continue to promote SAV protection at local, state and federal levels and when unavoidable impacts to SAV occur from permitted coastal alterations or other unintended actions, agencies should implement compensatory mitigation for the functional and temporal impacts.

There are six key components to achieving the goal of this policy: (1) assessment of historical, current and potential distribution and abundance of SAV; (2) protection of existing SAV; (3) SAV restoration and enhancement; (4) public education and involvement; (5) research; and (6) implementation. The background information, policies and recommended actions have been updated based on emerging issues and new information released over the past 20 years. A summary of SAV initiatives conducted by the Commission's state and federal partners is also included in this updated policy. The policy can be found here – http://www.asmfc.org/files/Habitat/HMS15_SAV_PolicyUpdate.pdf.

For more information on SAV, visit the Commission website at <http://www.asmfc.org/habitat/hot-topics> or contact Dr. Lisa Havel, Habitat Committee Coordinator, at lhavel@asmfc.org.

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