

April 9, 2021

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Subject: South Atlantic Salt Marsh Initiative

Dear SERPPAS Principals:

We the undersigned 24 organizations appreciate the opportunity to provide comments to the Southeast Regional Partnership for Planning and Sustainability (SERPPAS) in advance of the upcoming Principals Meeting scheduled for May 4, 2021. Together, we represent fishing, hunting, birding, boating, conservation, and public policy organizations united for the common purpose of salt marsh conservation and restoration. We urge the SERPPAS Principals to support the development of a comprehensive South Atlantic salt marsh plan modeled on the proven America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative and designed to ensure this vital habitat remains abundant and healthy for the benefit of coastal ecosystems, resource users, communities and military installations into the future.

The South Atlantic coast from North Carolina to Northeast Florida is home to an expansive network of over 1 million acres of salt marsh and tidal creeks that define and support a way of life for over 5.8 million coastal residents and tens of millions of tourists annually.ⁱ Salt marsh stands as a first line of defense for the many coastal communities and military installations of the South Atlantic region, improving water quality, reducing shoreline erosion, and providing protection and resilience benefits in terms of storm surge and flooding valued at about \$1.8 million/km² per year.ⁱⁱ A variety of commercially and recreationally valuable fish and wildlife also depend on this vital habitat for food, shelter, spawning, and nesting. That includes 75 percent of the region's finfish and shellfish species, such as redfish, white shrimp, and blue crabs, as well as important waterfowl and imperiled bird species, such as black duck, threatened wood stork and Eastern black rail.ⁱⁱⁱ According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, coastal habitat-related tourism and recreation, such as boating, fishing and eco-tourism, supported nearly 25,000 businesses and over half a million jobs for South Atlantic states in 2017.^{iv} In 2016, these resources supported an additional 16.8 million recreational fishing trips contributing over \$3.8 billion to the economy, as well as commercial seafood landings valued over \$190.9 million.^v The military and its many assets deployed along the South Atlantic coast are themselves a major economic engine for the region and beneficiary of the valuable ecosystem services salt marsh provides.

Salt marsh is at risk from changes to freshwater flow, as well as sea level rise. These conditions threaten to drown this vital habitat, impacting coastal communities, businesses, military installations, and fish and wildlife alike. Using the America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative as a model, we encourage SERPPAS to bring together local, state, and federal natural resources managers, the Department of Defense, the military services, scientists, non-governmental organizations, private land owners, resource users, communities, and other stakeholders that manage and rely on current salt marsh and adjacent upland areas to develop a regional South Atlantic salt marsh conservation plan, and then implement the priority actions identified to conserve, restore, and allow for the migration of this vital habitat in the face of

changing environmental conditions. In doing so, this voluntary partnership will advance shared resilience and coastal protection goals, support military readiness and working waters, and sustain valuable outdoor recreational opportunities for future generations.

Thank you for your long-running efforts towards balanced resource-use decisions supporting national defense, conservation of natural resources, and sustainable working lands and communities in the southeast United States. Please join us in seizing this forward-looking opportunity and provide your full support for the development and implementation of a comprehensive South Atlantic salt marsh conservation plan.

We look forward to working with you to safeguard the future of our coast.

Sincerely,

Kellie Ralston
Southeast Fisheries Policy Director
American Sportfishing Association

Mike Worley
President & CEO
Georgia Wildlife Federation

Julie Wraithmell
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Audubon Florida

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The Conservation Fund

Rob Kramer
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Wild Oceans

ⁱ Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for Coastal Counties in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2019 (CO-EST2019-ANNRES-13). <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/popest/2010s-counties-total.html>

ⁱⁱ F. Sun, R. T. Carson. Coastal wetlands reduce property damage during tropical cyclones. PNAS. 117 (11) 5719-5725 (2020). <https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/117/11/5719.full.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. What is a salt marsh? <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/saltmarsh.html>

^{iv} Office for Coastal Management: Digital Coast, "ENOW Explorer," National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, <https://coast.noaa.gov/enowexplorer/#/>.

^v National Marine Fisheries Service. 2018. Fisheries Economics of the United States, 2016. U.S. Dept. of Commerce, NOAA Tech. Memo. NMFS-F/SPO-187a, 243 p. <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/resource/document/fisheries-economics-united-states-report-2016>