

Board Approved 2024 NFHP National Conservation Priorities

Background. The ACE Act Section 203 (e)(1)(C) requires the National Fish Habitat Partnership (NFHP) Board to develop and use National Conservation Priorities (NCPs) as the basis for Fish Habitat Partnership (FHP) project development. NCPs are also needed to inform the 5-year Congressional report (Section 209 (a)(2)) which must include: an estimate of the amount of fish habitat maintained or improved by NFHP; a description of public access to fish habitat established or improved; a description of improved public recreational fishing; and an assessment of the status of fish habitat conservation projects.

NCPs are developed regularly by the NFHP Board (Board) to guide FHP project development and are critical to the FHP Request for Proposal (RFP) processes. To develop the FY2024 NCPs, a workgroup has been formed consisting of 6 Board members (Adam Ringia, Joe Slaughter, Carter Kruse, Jesse Trushenski, Stan Allen, and Gene Gilliland), 3 FHP Coordinators (Joan Drinkwin, Lori Maloney, and Jeff Boxrucker), and 4 Science and Data Committee members (Moe Nelson, Kate Sherman, Daniel Wieferich, and Gary Whelan).

Introduction. The National Fish Habitat Partnership has identified seven National Conservation Priorities (NCPs) to guide the work of the Fish Habitat Partnerships, the Board, and fish habitat conservation work at large for FY 2024. These NCPs are provided below along with a short intent statement about the NCP and example strategies intended to evoke the intention of each NCP, but not define or limit the kinds of efforts needed to protect, restore and enhance the nation's fish and aquatic communities. *The NFHP includes many FHP's, each with different goals and objectives, and as the systems and species we seek to conserve are diverse, so are the strategies that can meaningfully address our fish habitat conservation goals.* Example strategies are offered as just that—examples meant to encourage thought, not curb creativity. The NCPs are intended to create space and offer support to the many types of projects and activities that are bringing about positive change for fish and fish habitat. The number given to each NCP is strictly for organization and does not infer priority in anyway.

As used in the NCPs, the word *conserve* is broadly defined as protect, rehabilitate, restore, and improve.

Proposed 2024 NCPs and example strategies for Board consideration.

- 1. Conserve waters and habitats where all processes and functions are operating within their expected range or natural variation**

This priority focuses action on acquiring or protecting in other ways fish habitats that are currently functioning and are considered intact for the purpose of preventing future degradation. In essence: protect what is currently working.

Example strategies may include:

- a. Acquire land, water rights/reservations, or easements for intact systems.
- b. Protect habitat forming process (e.g., sediment transport, tidal regimes, riparian vegetation, nutrient regimes) in intact systems.
- c. Prevent the degradation of water quality parameters in intact systems.
- d. Create and implement management plans (including but not limited to fisheries management plans, invasive species plans, species recovery plans).

2. Conserve hydrologic conditions for fish

This priority focuses on ensuring that appropriate hydrologic (annual and daily flows) and hydrodynamic (current or velocity) conditions are always available to allow fish to optimize their production. This is accomplished by rehabilitating degraded and improving engineered hydrographs and hydrodynamic conditions to ensure all needed fish habitats are available at the appropriate times.

Example strategies may include:

- a. Restore natural-like conditions and variability for hydrology including currents and velocities in degraded and engineered systems.
- b. Secure fishery-favorable water level (rule curves) conditions in degraded and engineered lakes with water control structures, impoundments, and reservoirs
- c. Acquire water rights for streams, lakes, impoundments, and reservoirs for degraded and engineered systems.
- d. Work with water users to incorporate fish habitat values, including flows and water levels needed to sustain fish communities, into water management plans in degraded and engineered systems.
- e. Restore ground and surface water hydrologic connections in degraded and engineered systems.
- f. Manage or plant vegetation to conserve hydrologic conditions
- g. Restore tidal flow and alongshore/nearshore flow regimes in degraded and engineered marine systems.

3. Conserve physical and living habitats and features that support viable and sustainable species and/or populations in impacted or at-risk systems

This priority focuses on protection, rehabilitation, and/or enhancement of those critical habitat features within a waterbody that are necessary to support ecological function and processes such as structure, vegetation, habitat complexity, etc. that may be lacking, may have been altered, or simply may not be functioning effectively.

Example strategies may include:

- a. Restore instream meanders and reconnect floodplains in artificially straightened streams
- b. Rehabilitate, restore, or protect submerged aquatic vegetation
- c. Install artificial or natural habitat components (reefs, living shorelines, natural or artificial substrate, lake and reservoir structures, and woody material and boulders in stream)

4. Reconnect fragmented fish habitats

When aquatic habitats lack full connectivity, fish cannot freely move among the places they need to complete their life cycle and optimize their production. This priority is focused on identifying, removing, rehabilitating, or otherwise addressing anthropogenic barriers so they no longer restrict fish movement and instead allow fish to access habitats, migrate, locate refugia, and seek food and mates.

Example strategies may include:

- a. Identify access impairments to spawning, nursery, rearing, and refugia areas.
- b. Facilitate removal of physical anthropogenic barriers
- c. Incorporate fish friendly designs for both upstream and downstream movement in construction and rehabilitation of water diversion systems and other dams.
- d. Restore habitat conditions (physical, temperature, chemical, lack of water, buried stream segments, concrete channels, etc.) in anthropogenically altered reaches that fragment systems.
- e. Restore or rehabilitate tidal connectivity in estuaries

5. Conserve water quality for fish

This priority focuses on efforts to conserve the physical, chemical, and biological aspects of water quality, mitigate causes of impairment, and restore degraded conditions in support of fish habitat and fish populations.

Example strategies may include:

- a. Implement practices to conserve watersheds and processes that maintain water quality for fish.
- b. Projects to reduce or control thermal impairments, pollutants, surface runoff, tidal flow restrictions, and/or sedimentation in degraded systems
- c. Reestablish functioning wetlands, vegetation buffers, and similar habitat in degraded systems

6. Support the structure and function of FHPs

The FHPs conduct the foundational work necessary to ensure that NFHP achieves its mission to protect, restore and enhance the nation's fish and aquatic communities through partnerships that foster fish habitat conservation and improve the quality of life for the American people. This priority focuses on supporting strong and effective FHPs and their unique approaches to collaborative, science-driven fish habitat conservation.

Example strategies may include:

- a. Secure funding for FHP operations (including administrative, outreach, and science needs).
- b. Create, implement, and revise aquatic habitat management plans (e.g., FHP strategic plans, fisheries management plans, invasive species plans, species recovery plans) in concert with FHP partner organizations and entities.
- c. Develop and maintain monitoring frameworks and data systems for habitat conditions and FHP projects.
- d. Facilitate outreach events/efforts that elevate public interest in conserving aquatic habitat.
- e. Facilitate implementation of fish habitat conservation and assessment projects supported by multiple funding sources.

7. Enhance recreational, commercial, subsistence, and traditional fishing opportunities when conducting projects that conserve fish habitat

This priority includes actions that are intended to broaden support for fish habitat conservation, increase fishing opportunities, support traditional practices, and increase participation in fish habitat conservation activities by local community, particularly young people, by improving access, education, and participation.

Example strategies may include:

- a. Educate youth and adults in fishing and habitat conservation best practices in concert with habitat conservation outreach.
- b. Consider and engage tribal communities where applicable to ensure that habitat conservation projects support Tribal fishing rights where possible.

- c. Improve access to fishing opportunities by Install/improve fishing docks, access ramps, shoreline structures, and trails when part of the habitat conservation project.