

Policies and Guidance for  
**FISH HABITAT PARTNERSHIPS**

National Fish Habitat Board

**Introduction**

Fish Habitat Partnerships (FHPs) recognized by the National Fish Habitat Board (Board) are the primary work units of the National Fish Habitat Action Plan (Action Plan). The Board has adopted these policies as guidance for three distinct phases in FHP development.

- **Section 1 (The Roles of Partners and Partnerships under the Action Plan)** is targeted toward groups and individuals who want to become involved in the Action Plan, and may be thinking about establishing a Fish Habitat Partnership.
- **Section 2 (Requirements for Establishing a Fish Habitat Partnership)** describes the mandatory requirements for recognition of Fish Habitat Partnerships by the Board.
- **Section 3 (Operational Requirements for Fish Habitat Partnerships)** describes the functions that Fish Habitat Partnerships are expected to fulfill after they are recognized by the Board.

The primary guidance for establishing FHPs is the Action Plan itself. The policies provided here supplement the broad guidelines in the Action Plan, and are intended to be fully consistent with the Action Plan.

**From the *National Fish Habitat Action Plan*:**

Page 5

**Objectives**

- Identify priority fish habitats and establish Fish Habitat Partnerships targeting these habitats by 2010.
- Establish 12 or more Fish Habitat Partnerships throughout the United States by 2010.

Page 8

**Fish Habitat Partnerships**

Fish Habitat Partnerships are the primary work units of the National Fish Habitat Action Plan. These partnerships are formed around important aquatic habitats and distinct geographic areas (e.g., Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership), "keystone" fish species (e.g. eastern brook trout and western native trout) or system types (e.g. large lakes, impoundments, estuaries).

Page 9

... Roles of the [National Fish Habitat] Board include: ...

- Develop appropriate policies and guidance for recognizing partnerships and criteria for allocating national funding and related resources.

## **Section 1: The Roles of Partners and Partnerships in the Action Plan**

During the first two years of Action Plan implementation, many new coalitions have organized or strengthened in support of the Action Plan, indicating a high level of interest across the nation. To maintain this momentum, the Board seeks to clarify the roles of partners and partnerships under the Action Plan.

The Board encourages all entities with an interest in fish habitat conservation to become involved with existing FHPs wherever possible, whether those FHPs have gained recognition by the Board or are still organizing. For geographic areas, fish species or system types that are not represented in existing FHPs, the Board may encourage an FHP to expand its scope, or it may recruit individual jurisdictions or other partnership-based entities to organize new FHPs to address these gaps.

### **Candidate Fish Habitat Partnerships**

Emerging or established partnerships that intend to seek Board recognition as FHPs may request "Candidate" Fish Habitat Partnership status. The Candidate category creates a linkage with the Action Plan and avails the partnership of technical assistance from the Board and its staff. Candidate status may be requested by sending a letter of intent to the Board describing the important fish habitat that the partnership is focusing on and how the partnership is working toward meeting the requirements in Section 2. Requests for Candidate status will be acknowledged by letter from the Board Chair, providing substantive feedback to improve the likelihood that the recipient will work expeditiously to meet the criteria for recognition. The Board will maintain a database of Candidate Fish Habitat Partnerships to facilitate communication.

### **Partners Coalition**

The Board also acknowledges the existence and importance of many other ongoing local, regional, and national organizations and projects that protect, restore, and enhance fish habitat across the nation. Although their contributions will assist in achieving the goals of the Action Plan, many of these interests may choose not to seek formal recognition by the Board as a Fish Habitat Partnership. Accordingly, the Board encourages all entities involved in fish habitat conservation efforts to, at a minimum, register as "Coalition Partners" on the Action Plan website ([fishhabitat.org](http://fishhabitat.org)). This will provide them an opportunity to highlight their commitments to fish habitat conservation and to ensure they will be informed of ongoing progress made by the Board and the recognized Fish Habitat Partnerships. It will also contribute to networking and sharing of useful information relevant to all of these efforts.

## **Section 2: Requirements for Establishing Fish Habitat Partnerships**

The Board will recognize Fish Habitat Partnerships based on the following criteria.

### **Strong and diverse partnerships**

- FHPs are self-identified, self-organized, and self-directed communities of interest formed around geographic areas, keystone species, or system types.
- FHPs will involve diverse groups of public and private partners that are focused on conservation of important fish habitat, which have assembled into a partnership organization capable of meeting the operational responsibilities of FHPs to achieve results across jurisdictional boundaries and land ownership types.
- FHPs must seek and encourage involvement by State fish and wildlife agencies, Native American governments, and federal agencies that manage fish resources within their partnership areas, and document these efforts.
- FHPs will have a high level of commitment from State and federal agencies and other member entities, to ensure development and implementation of strategic plans that are consistent with membership organization priorities. Commitment may be demonstrated through endorsement by regional Associations of Fish and Wildlife Agencies or similar entities, memoranda of understanding among jurisdictions, letters of support from agency directors, or other written evidence.
- FHPs will have governance structures that reflect the range of all partners and promote joint strategic planning and decision-making by the partnership.
- Each FHP will use the term “Fish Habitat Partnership” to describe its organization, either as part of its name or in an accompanying tagline if another name is already established.

### **Geographic focus**

- In general, FHPs will have geographically defined boundaries that encompass large landscapes, allowing a holistic approach to conserving fish habitats. FHP boundaries should be configured to maximize geographic coverage and minimize overlap among FHPs.
- Alternatively, a limited number of FHPs may be based on system types in those cases where system characteristics transcend geographic boundaries. Examples may include reservoirs, natural lakes, or urban estuaries. System type FHPs will work closely with geographic FHPs to enhance science and conservation for that system type within the areas covered by geographic FHPs.
- The scope of issues and priorities addressed by an FHP should be nationally significant, by virtue of uniqueness, geographic size, or per other criteria identified by the Action Plan Science and Data committee.
- Geographically-defined FHPs may be of any spatial scale, but a minimum size on the order of 50,000 square miles is preferred to allow an FHP to meet its operational responsibilities, to achieve effective prioritization of habitat needs across large landscapes, and to demonstrate success in strategically addressing

those needs. Smaller geographic areas that are ecologically similar and contiguous should be grouped within a single larger FHP.

### **Strategic planning**

- Consistent with national goals adopted by the Board, FHPs will identify strategic fish habitat priorities for their partnership area in the form of geographic focus areas, habitat types, or key stressors or impairments to facilitate strategic planning and decision-making.
- Each FHP must have or must demonstrate significant progress toward development of a strategic plan. The plan must focus to the degree practicable on addressing causes of and processes behind system decline rather than simply treating symptoms. Significant progress toward completion shall be demonstrated by an advanced draft and a clear timeline not exceeding one year leading to final approval of the plan through the FHPs governance structure. The Board may provide a recommended framework for strategic planning.
- Each FHP will consult with neighboring and overlapping FHPs to resolve competing or conflicting conservation goals, maximize geographic coverage, and minimize overlap. FHPs must document good faith efforts to reconcile these issues before applying to the Board for recognition or funding.

### **Capabilities for scientific assessment**

- Organizations involved in each FHP will have capabilities to measure and demonstrate progress – through existing programs where possible – using science-based resource assessment, project evaluation, and reporting of outcomes in coordination with the Board.
- FHPs will adopt the national science assessment framework established by the Board's Science and Data Committee for resource assessment and project evaluation, and use the framework according to operational guidance in Section 3.

### **Application Process**

The Board will periodically invite applications from Candidate Fish Habitat Partnerships with a due date approximately 90 days from the date of invitation. Invitations and application forms will be sent to Candidate FHPs, and informational notices will be sent to the Partners Coalition and posted at [www.fishhabitat.org](http://www.fishhabitat.org). Additional information may be requested by an e-mail to [partner@fishhabitat.org](mailto:partner@fishhabitat.org).

Partnerships applying for recognition by the Board are strongly encouraged to coordinate with Board staff in the application process. Early and frequent coordination will save time and enhance the likelihood that an application will be successful.

### **Section 3: Operational Guidance for Fish Habitat Partnerships**

Fish Habitat Partnerships are responsible for implementing the Action Plan by undertaking the following operational roles:

- Coordinate and compile scientific assessment information on fish habitats within their partnership areas.
- Establish strategic goals and objectives that define desired outcomes for fish species and habitats within their partnership areas.
- Identify priority places and/or issues to focus conservation action, and prioritize fish habitat conservation projects to meet goals and objectives.
- Coordinate and compile information on outputs (conservation activities) and outcomes (changes in habitat condition) for reporting to the Board and stakeholders.
- Collaborate with other FHPs where appropriate to carry out these responsibilities.

The Board has responsibility to oversee and coordinate implementation of the Action Plan through the FHPs.

- The Board will monitor the performance and needs of FHPs nationwide, and will update this Guidance as needed to address changing conditions.
- Monitoring by the Board is intended to be supportive, not burdensome, to FHP operations, participation, and innovation.
- Recognized FHPs will be re-evaluated by the Board as needed, at an interval of five years or less, to confirm that they continue to meet the criteria in this Guidance.

#### **Strategic planning and assessment**

- FHPs will make good faith efforts to ensure that their goals and activities are complementary to the goals and activities of neighboring or overlapping FHPs, Joint Ventures established under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, and other state, tribal, and regional habitat conservation plans, including State Wildlife Action Plans.
- FHPs will measure progress against goals established in their strategic plans, and utilize adaptive management principles to incorporate assessment results into conservation strategies and projects.
- FHPs will share data and science with all partners and coordinate their information with the Board's Science and Data Committee.
- FHPs will use the national science assessment framework established by the Board's Science and Data Committee. However, FHPs are encouraged to expand the assessment information base beyond the national framework to include additional variables that more fully explain the processes of their systems, or to use surrogate variables to those used in the national science assessment framework that are shown to better measure or classify their systems.

#### **Implementing fish habitat projects**

- FHPs will utilize their strategic priorities and system assessment scores to identify and rank projects that protect, restore, and enhance fish habitats.
- FHPs will leverage funds and capabilities to implement projects that achieve results greater than could be achieved by any partner acting individually.
- FHPs are encouraged to utilize all of the assets of their partners to ensure the success of fish habitat projects.
- FHPs will report accomplishments and outcomes through information channels established by the Board.
- FHPs will designate communication personnel to promote broad understanding of their strategic visions and accomplishments.

### Working at multiple scales

FHPs establish strategic planning frameworks, within which more localized action plans and fish habitat conservation projects are nested. Following is an example of how FHPs may work at multiples scales:

- An FHP develops a strategic plan that describes desired resource outcomes in its partnership area, which may encompass **500,000 square miles** and several states. The strategic plan is developed using input from State Wildlife Action Plans, watershed plans, recovery plans, existing assessment reports, and the knowledge of local fish and habitat managers.
  - The strategic plan identifies a number of geographic focus areas that are high priority for achieving strategic goals. These focus areas may be watersheds on the order of **1,000-5,000 square miles**.
    - Within one of the focus areas, a local watershed group is exploring opportunities to restore water quality and improve fishing and other recreational opportunities in a watershed of **200 square miles**.
      - The local group identifies a project to remove an obsolete dam and restore the riparian area. The project aligns with the strategic goals of the FHP and would directly benefit **one mile of stream**.
      - The watershed group works with landowners and local, state, and federal agencies to develop specific plans and a funding proposal for the project. Commitments for cash and in-kind contributions are obtained.
    - An FHP technical committee reviews the project and determines that it will help to achieve desired outcomes within the geographic focus area, and recommends that it be funded.
  - The FHP ranks the project proposal against others within its geographic area. The project is ranked highly by the FHP.
  - The project proposal is selected for funding by the funding agency.
    - Funds for the project are transferred to the local agency office, and/or contracted to the local watershed group.
    - The project is implemented by the local cooperators. Site-specific results are documented.
    - Affected fish populations and habitat conditions are evaluated by the state fishery agency at the 200-square-mile watershed scale, as the effects of the project extend beyond the project site itself.
  - The FHP reports project accomplishments, compiles updated information on habitat conditions, and uses the information when it re-evaluates its strategic priorities.

## **Definitions**

**Fish Habitat Partnership (FHP)** - a National Fish Habitat Board approved group of state, federal, local, nonprofit, tribal, Alaskan Native or private individuals or entities that coordinate to implement the Plan at a regional level. Fish habitat conservation projects proposed by these FHPs are eligible for funding as NFHAP projects.

**Candidate Fish Habitat Partnership** - a partnership that is working toward recognition by the Board as a Fish Habitat Partnership, and has notified the Board of its intent. Candidate Fish Habitat Partnerships are eligible for coordination and technical assistance from the Board. Fish habitat conservation projects proposed by these Partnerships are eligible for funding as NFHAP projects.

**Coalition Partner** - a partnership that is not working toward recognition by the Board as a Fish Habitat Partnership, but that is working to achieve the goals of the Action Plan through the conservation of fish habitat. Coalition Partners will share in the coordination and technical assistance provided by the Board.

### **Fish habitat conservation project**

- (a) approved actions taken for the conservation or management of aquatic habitat for fish and other aquatic organisms;
- (b) the provision of technical assistance to states and local communities to facilitate development of strategies and priorities for aquatic habitat conservation;
- (c) the obtaining of a real property interest in lands or waters, including water rights, if the obtaining of such interest is subject to terms and conditions that will ensure that the real property will be administered for the long-term conservation of such lands and waters and the fish dependent thereon. Real property interest means any ownership interest in lands or a building or an object that is permanently affixed to land.

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### **For more information**

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