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Report on Nation's Waterways Provides Insight into Habitat Changes

2015 Assessment Report Expands on First Ever Assessment Completed in 2010

(Washington, DC) - The National Fish Habitat Partnership, www.fishhabitat.org has released their latest Assessment Report, titled: "THROUGH A FISH'S EYE: THE STATUS OF FISH HABITATS IN THE UNITED STATES 2015." This report summarizes the results of an unprecedented, nationwide assessment of human effects on fish habitat in the rivers and estuaries of the United States. The assessment assigns a risk of current habitat degradation scores for watersheds and estuaries across the nation and within 14 sub-regions. The results also identify the major sources of habitat degradation.

The 2015 report updates and revises the 2010 "Status of Fish Habitats in the United States," that summarized initial results of a first-ever comprehensive national assessment of aquatic habitats at an unprecedented scale and level of detail. The 2015 report provides even greater detail and improves our knowledge of the condition of fish habitat in the United States. The 2010 inland streams assessment characterized fish habitat condition using stream fish data from more than 26,000 stream reaches, while the 2015 assessment was based on fish data from more than 39,000 stream reaches nationally. To increase accuracy, the 2015 inland stream assessment incorporated 12 additional human disturbance variables into the fish analysis, when compared to the 2010 assessment. Additional variables incorporated into the 2015 assessment and their summary within catchments and buffers allowed for more explicit characterization of the diverse set of disturbances to stream fish habitats occurring across the Nation than what occurred in 2010, and this was made possible due in part to advances in available GIS layers. With the incorporation of these additional disturbances, managers and decision makers can use assessment results to more explicitly identify limits to stream fish habitats.

KEY REPORT FINDINGS:

The United States is home to a diverse array of freshwater and marine fish, shellfish, and other aquatic species. More than 3,000 species of fish inhabit America's streams, rivers, lakes, reservoirs, marshes, swamps, bays, estuaries, coral reefs, seagrass beds, shallow water banks, deep ocean canyons, and other aquatic habitats. The United States is also home to more than [322 million people](#), [39% of whom live near the coasts](#) and all depending on the same water that fish call home. [In 2012, approximately 25 percent of the nation's acreage was agricultural and 6 percent was developed.](#) However, these and

other consequences of human inhabitation affect much broader areas by altering water flow (hydrology), water quality, and many aquatic habitat characteristics. Few aquatic habitats in America have been or are currently unaffected by human activity and some have been severely degraded.

Within the United States, aquatic habitats with both high and low risk of degradation occur in landscapes with specific characteristics. Aquatic habitats tend to have a very high risk of degradation in landscapes with urban areas, high intensity agriculture, and heavy industrial use. In landscapes with sparse populations, including Alaska, national parks, and other protected areas, aquatic habitats tend to have a low risk of degradation. While our national map shows landscapes with such patterns of low and high risk of degradation, many locations throughout the United States may be threatened and would benefit from protection to prevent degradation or rehabilitation if they are degraded at this time.

The report also documents areas where fish habitat is most likely still unaffected by human development and likely intact with the largest amount in Alaska. It is critical that these areas be protected to maintain their value for aquatic organisms and for the recreation of the people that use those waterways. Moreover, it is far more cost effective to protect a pristine area, at minimum a 10:1 return on dollars invested, rather than allow it to become degraded and then have to fund expensive rehabilitation efforts.

Furthermore, our efforts to measure habitat condition and to use this information to conserve fish habitats are limited by the available information. It is critical to have data collected in a consistent, comparable manner across the United States to allow a national assessment to be properly developed and to be fully used in conservation planning. There are a number of geographic areas and key habitat types that could not be evaluated by this assessment due to the lack of available national resources and information including the nation's lakes, reservoirs, Great Lakes, Alaskan estuaries, and inshore and offshore marine areas. There is a critical need for the collection, standardization, and analysis of data to assess fish habitat in these areas. New sources of information and data are also essential to allow the detailed analysis of water flow patterns (hydrology), grazing intensity, forestry practices, small dams and culverts, sedimentation, riparian management, channel and bottom morphology, water quality (in particular temperature and dissolved oxygen), and the effects of organisms on their environment on fish habitat. This information is crucial to communicating threats to these fish habitats, prioritizing fish habitat conservation efforts, and determining the best strategies to maximize limited resources.

Resources for fish habitat conservation are limited. This report illustrates the need for and the value of the strategic use of those existing resources through partnerships - such as the Fish Habitat Partnerships established under the National Fish Habitat Action Plan - that can identify the most effective use of funds and help the nation as a whole make progress in fish habitat conservation. Examples of how collaborative fish habitat action can bring change are included in each regional section.

The 2015 Report is unique, as it is a web-based application with a framework that allows for efficient updates of assessment information and findings through time. The 2015 report allows users to navigate findings and explore interactive maps of results by region or nationally. In addition, the report provides users with the ability to download sections of the report as PDF documents, or to save and share a web link that is unique to a subsection of interest. The 2015 Report and Assessment can be found at:

<http://assessment.fishhabitat.org>.

This report provides an important picture of the challenges and opportunities facing fish and those engaged in fish habitat conservation efforts. Urban land use, agriculture, dams, culverts, pollution, and other human development have resulted in specific areas of degraded habitat where rehabilitation is most likely needed to bring back the healthy habitats and fishing opportunities that once existed. Addressing degraded habitat also requires reducing or eliminating the sources of degradation mentioned in this report, through best management practices, land use planning, and engaging landowners, businesses, and local communities in the effort. This report identifies areas where those efforts are most needed.

This Assessment would not have been possible without key contributions from the Assessment writing team, National Fish Habitat Partnership (Science and Data Team), Michigan State University (Inland Assessment), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) (Coastal Assessment) and U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) (Data Management and Report Development).

“This Report serves as a good indicator to identify areas where habitat conservation efforts are most critical and points to areas where fish habitat is most likely intact and should be protected. This report can be a great tool in the decision making process in setting conservation and project priorities.” said Tom Champeau, Chair of the National Fish Habitat Board.

“The 2015 (inland) assessment is a remarkable and comprehensive view into the condition of the Nation’s rivers. It is a national tool to raise public awareness on the state of and threats to our rivers, and it gives managers and decision-makers critical information on where and how to conserve and restore river fish habitats.” said Dana Infante, Associate Professor at Michigan State University. “We are very proud of the assessment outcomes and acknowledge contributions from partners across the Nation including giving us feedback on our approach and sharing data.”

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About the National Fish Habitat Partnership:

2016 marks the 10-year Anniversary of the National Fish Habitat Partnership. Since 2006, The Partnership has supported 599 projects benefiting fish habitat in all 50 states. The Partnership works to conserve fish habitat nationwide, leveraging federal, state, tribal, and private funding resources to achieve the greatest impact on fish populations through priority conservation projects of 20 regionally-based Fish Habitat Partnerships. For more information visit:

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