

# National Fish Habitat Initiative Report

To AFS, IAFWA, SFBPC and USFWS

*A final report on stakeholder scoping meetings regarding development  
of a national fish habitat protection strategy*

August 13, 2004

## ***Introduction to the NFHI Scoping Process***

### **The problem: Fish habitat degradation**

Aquatic resources in the United States are in decline. Destruction of habitat is a principal culprit. Habitat alteration is a major contributing factor to 75 percent of all fish extinctions during the past 75 years and 91 percent of fish listings under the Endangered Species Act.

### **NFHI: The start to a solution**

National conservation leaders agree that something must be done – a National Fish Habitat Initiative (NFHI). NFHI is a nationwide strategy that harnesses the energies, expertise and existing partnerships of state and federal agencies and conservation organizations. Their goal is to focus national attention and resources on common priorities to improve aquatic habitat health.

### **How is it happening?**

Fisheries leaders met at five U.S. locations between December 2003 and August 2004 to develop strategies and goals for the initiative in scoping meetings. The concept was also discussed at other meetings of fisheries conservation leaders and on an individual basis with agencies and organizations.

These stakeholders have recommended that NFHI foster geographically focused, locally driven, scientifically based partnerships to protect, restore and enhance the aquatic habitats across the nation. They often compare the Initiative to the highly successful North American Waterfowl Management Plan. NAWMP was implemented in the 1980s to forge partnerships to restore or protect waterfowl wetland breeding areas totaling millions of acres.

**This report describes the process to achieve consensus** regarding the need for and scope of the initiative and summarizes the results of the stakeholder meetings. For additional information on the NFHI, go to [www.fishhabitat.org](http://www.fishhabitat.org).

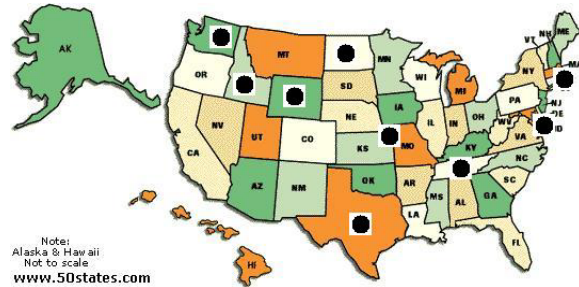
## ***Components of the Scoping Process***

- Contacts and Sponsors From Stakeholders Meetings
  - Stakeholder meetings
  - Presentations to federal agencies and other organizations
  - Preparation for an AFS scientific protocols working group
  - Contact database
  - Sponsors for stakeholder meetings
  
- Communication With Stakeholders
  - Electronic newsletter
  - Written and online evaluation forms
  - Website
  - AFS Working Group information and abstracts on monitoring efforts
  - Contact database for long term follow-up
  
- Overview of Stakeholder Meetings
  - Midwest meeting, Kansas City, Mo.
  - Pacific northwest meeting, Spokane, Wash.
  - Northeast meeting, Ocean City, Md.
  - Southeast meeting, Nashville, Tenn.
  - AFS Fisheries Administrators Section, San Antonio, Texas
  - Western meeting, Sun Valley, Idaho
  
- Meeting Agenda
  - Welcome and introduction to SFBPC process
  - Development of NAWMP and joint ventures
  - Facilitated discussion as a group and in breakouts
  - List of questions discussed at each meeting
  
- Results of Stakeholder Meetings
  - What are the benefits of a *national* plan?
  - What processes could be used to develop and implement a plan?
  - How would we focus existing efforts and resources?
  - Focusing on what habitats, impacts, authorities, and partnerships?
  - What are the impediments to carrying out the plan?
  - What are the next steps at the regional level?
  
- Conclusions and Next Steps
  - Calendar of related meetings
  - Recommendations from SFBPC and transfer to IAFWA leadership
  
- Contact Us
  - Report and newsletter subscription (DJCA)
  - Scoping meetings and website (SFBPC)
  - Leadership and future partners (IAFWA)
  
- Agencies and Organizations Represented at Stakeholder Meetings

## Contacts and Sponsors From Stakeholders Meetings

Over 195 participants representing 77 agencies and organizations signed in to discuss NFHI during facilitated stakeholder meetings held from December 2003 through July 2004 in Kansas City, Mo., Spokane, Wash., Ocean City, Md., Nashville, Tenn., and Sun Valley, Idaho, and at the AFS Fisheries Administrators Section meeting in San Antonio, Texas.

A complete list of the agencies and organizations represented at the stakeholder meetings is provided at the end of this report, including 37 state agencies, 8 federal agencies and 32 nongovernmental organizations.



In addition, SFBPC staff made presentations to administrators from several federal agencies, as well as at the following meetings:

- Native American Fish and Wildlife Society, Jackson Hole, Wyo., May 3-6
- The Coastal Society Conference, Newport, RI, May 23-26
- Midwest Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Annual Meeting, Bismarck, ND, July 11-13

To develop a solid scientific foundation for NFHI, a workshop titled “Healthy Fish Habitats: Creating Benchmarks For Success” is scheduled in conjunction with the AFS Annual Meeting in Madison, Wis. Sponsors for the event are AFS, IAFWA, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, SFBPC and USFWS. This facilitated workshop takes place on August 22 from 8 a.m. to 2:45 p.m.

In preparation for the workshop, NFHI coordinators produced and maintain a website through which participants can: 1) obtain NFHI information; and 2) submit and review abstracts describing existing habitat monitoring efforts.

Through invitation lists and inquiries, a contact database of 379 people representing 186 agencies and organizations, sorted by region and meeting participation, was used to distribute information throughout the scoping process.

### Sponsors for stakeholder meetings

Sponsors for meeting logistics, facilitation, materials and communications with stakeholders included:



- AFS
- B.A.S.S. / ESPN Outdoors
- Bass Pro Shops
- IAFWA
- National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
- Trout Unlimited
- USFWS

## ***Communications With Stakeholders***

NFHI coordinators kept stakeholders informed before and after scoping meetings through use of:

- A 7- to 8-page electronic newsletter summarized meetings, provided news about events and services and thanked sponsors. All potential participants within the growing database received these newsletters by email.
- An evaluation form given to participants after each meeting (in paper or online format) gathered recommendations to improve meetings in other regions and determine interest in further participation.
- The NFHI website, which currently catalogues all materials and events associated with NFHI's scoping and implementation phases.

Contact databases, organized by region and scoping meeting, allow NFHI coordinators to maintain contact as the NFHI develops.

## ***Overview of Stakeholder Meetings***

As stakeholder meetings progressed, the tenor and responses changed depending on regional habitat-related issues and types of participants (from agency program managers and administrators to NGO and industry leaders).

**December 2003: Midwest Meeting, Kansas City, Mo.:** The kick-off meeting focused on the Midwest and covered the Initiative's relationship to a number of multi-state organizations addressing the Great Lakes and large rivers, including the Mississippi Interstate Cooperative Resource Association, Great Lakes Fishery Commission and Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership. (40 participants)

**March 2004: Pacific Northwest Meeting, Spokane, Wash.:** Participants talked about NFHI's relationship with existing watershed-based initiatives, as well as opportunities to build upon ongoing outreach and management efforts related to salmon, sub-basin planning, instream flow protection and endangered species protection. (52 participants)

**April 2004: Northeast Meeting, Ocean City, Md.:** Fisheries managers focused on NAWMP and joint ventures as a model for NFHI administration. Participants encouraged development of NFHI even if details currently are unclear. They also discussed the need to recognize connections between inland waters, estuaries, marine habitats and fish populations. (29 participants)

**May 2004: Southeast Meeting, Nashville, Tenn.:** Fisheries and aquatics leaders described how regional partnerships could invigorate NFHI with their passion and progress. In return, NFHI can fortify regional efforts with support and influence at the highest levels. Similar regional and local initiatives can provide a web of support for a national fish habitat framework. (19 participants)

**June 2004: AFS Fisheries Administrators Section Meeting, San Antonio, Texas:** Fisheries administrators spoke frankly about concerns involving funding and program relationships as NFHI nears the planning phase. They discussed how AFS efforts relate to the NFHI, such as the North American Agenda for Aquatic Resources and Fisheries Conservation Foundation. (27 participants)

**July 2004: Western Meeting, Sun Valley, Idaho:** Western fisheries leaders identified common ground and characteristics that would shape NFHI in their region. Western

leaders' top concerns were: relatively small percentages of private property ownership; management challenges on vast public lands; partnering with existing local efforts; and water rights issues. Everyone agreed that a national initiative is worth the effort. The group encouraged IAFWA to develop clear objectives and to design NFHI as an umbrella for existing and future habitat-related programs. (28 participants)

## ***Meeting Agenda***

Most meetings were scheduled from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and began with a brief welcome from regional fisheries leaders, including FWS regional and state agency directors. Group discussion followed an introductory presentation on SFBPC's history leading to NFHI, as well as similar development of the NAWMP and joint ventures. Groups of six to 10 people then met in facilitated break out sessions, recording notes on laptops or flipcharts.

The following questions guided discussions:

1. What are benefits of a *national* plan to address fisheries and aquatic habitats?
2. What processes could be used to develop and implement the plan?
3. How would we focus existing efforts and resources to develop the plan?
4. On what habitats, impacts, authorities and partnerships should the plan concentrate?
5. What are impediments to carrying out the plan?
6. What are next steps at the regional level?

During full-day meetings, facilitators summarized notes from break out sessions and reported to the group during afternoon sessions, allowing stakeholders to hold further discussions. In meetings with lower attendance or less time, all participants remained together for discussion.

## ***Results of Stakeholder Meetings***

This summary shows the range and scope of stakeholders' concerns. It does not represent conclusions or any effort to achieve consensus. Rather, it offers general information from which to develop recommendations on how to proceed.

Extensive summaries of each meeting are available in e-newsletters. Comprehensive details are presented in notes taken at each meeting. All materials generated through scoping meetings are available online at: [www.fishhabitat.org](http://www.fishhabitat.org).

- 1. What are benefits of a *national* plan to address fisheries and aquatic habitats?**
  - Address large-scale habitat problems on an ecosystem scale.
  - Recognize that habitat loss is a national problem and that fisheries resources depend on habitat.
  - Bring fisheries issues to the table with water quality and quantity issues.
  - Quantify fisheries habitat needs across the country.
  - Explain status of America's fisheries to the public.
  - Create recognition that habitat is not a localized, special interest situation, but that it affects everyone.
  - Create ongoing congressional recognition of the problem.
  - Create a framework to work with key national groups.
  - Acquire funding for state agencies through non-traditional sources.

- Enhance cooperation between agencies that currently aren't aware of these issues.

**2. What processes could be used to develop and implement the plan?**

- Provide a framework that is non-regulatory and non-confrontational.
- Institutionalize the process so those who follow can build upon it.
- Build consensus with state and federal agency staff, then create an action committee for next steps and partnering.
- Take advantage of momentum that is building around the country for habitat work, including actions taken through the Oceans Commission.
- Present the Initiative in conjunction with regular meetings of other groups, rather than trying to unite diverse groups at one meeting.
- Strategically determine when partners from land and water management agencies and private sector should be brought on board—at plan development and/or implementation.
- Get all groups to buy-in early to set the stage for later support.
- Shift how business is done from command-and-control to a web of relationships.
- Encourage grassroots organizations to get local officials' support.
- Include non-traditional partners (whitewater rafting, power companies, fishing and kayaking interests) to develop habitat restoration projects.

**3. How would we focus existing efforts and resources to develop the plan?**

- Inventory existing efforts and look for commonality in effective approaches.
- Review models in other countries and organizations that have created similar programs (e.g., Australia, South Africa, The Nature Conservancy, World Wildlife Fund).
- Convey a sense of urgency to the average American by connecting fish and concepts of clean water, healthy watersheds and economic impacts. Convince water-based industries that it's cheaper to work on habitat issues than to treat contaminated water.
- Establish powerful objectives to which key constituents relate, such as the “fishable, swimmable and drinkable” goals of the Clean Water Act.
- Keep clear, concise goals in mind to offset conflicts that will arise between special interests.
- Consolidate and develop standards for baseline monitoring data to facilitate comparisons regionally and nationally. Data can be used to market the Initiative and track accomplishments.
- Set targets and goals for monitoring; use benchmarking and baseline data to refine the process in an adaptive cycle.
- Action will be more appealing than planning to local groups.
- Keep it simple and show an impact (e.g., riparian buffers).

“If we don't do something now, we won't have aquatic resources in the future. Water is a limited resource in the West and will be allocated to other uses if we fail to promote fish habitat needs.”  
 -- Dale Hall, Southwest Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

**4. On what habitats, impacts, authorities and partnerships should the plan concentrate?**

- Develop a consistent system to assess and prioritize projects that is applicable at national, regional and local levels.
- Encompass relationships between inland waters and coastal zones.

- Set criteria to judge effectiveness of projects: Start with scientific criteria, then find projects with political support.
- Identify nationwide threats, then set priorities to conduct habitat projects through NFHI. Partnering efforts will develop on a regional and local basis.
- Focus on habitats where success is more likely. Indicators of success could include:
  - Increased biodiversity
  - Self-sustaining populations of fish and aquatic species
  - Fishable fisheries and increased recreational opportunities
  - Additional habitat for fish and aquatic species
  - Habitat and water quality and quantity to support healthy fisheries
- Determine whether the framework should focus on habitat issues versus a geographic or watershed basis.
- Don't rush to decide which habitats to protect; avoid decisions that separate people who need to work together.
- Identify and work within existing regional fisheries and aquatic resource initiatives (e.g., watershed councils for salmon recovery, MICRA, SARP, joint ventures, Chesapeake Bay).
- Work with established land and water management programs on areas involving public and private ownership (e.g. watershed management, total maximum daily load, water allocation permits, conservation easements, Farm Bill programs, AFS North American Agenda for Aquatic Resources).
- Recognize that there may be trade-offs between habitat attributes (e.g., reservoirs or free-flowing streams).
- Identify fish that can serve as a "poster child" to relate entire habitat and fishery life cycles to the public (e.g., salmon).
- Make a difference in the perspectives of young people whose decisions will determine the status of habitat and aquatic resources.

## 5. What are impediments to carrying out the plan?

- Lack of knowledge about quantifiable habitat/species relationships and inability to effectively communicate to the public.
- The amount and quality of baseline data and availability of skilled professionals varies widely across regions.
- Sheer scale of problems and associated factors, such as accounting for multi-decadal drought and global climate change.
- Scale and difficulty of envisioning a national landscape scale effort when fisheries managers are used to working at a local level.
- Sprawl, water rights and agricultural land use are complex issues that extend far beyond the direct influence of fisheries managers.
- Gravitation towards comfortable subjects, such as traditional fish management, and not working in new areas such as local land use or water quality regulation.
- Jurisdictional disputes and fragmentation among authorities that are responsible for protecting fisheries habitat.

"As we approach the last stakeholder meeting for scoping out initial support for NFHI, we are recognizing the real challenge in getting our arms around the broad array of fish habitat issues across the country. The key will be to develop a framework that translates well to the local level and enhances existing projects."

— Doug Hansen, IAPWA/SFPBC

- Local efforts may be based on fragile coalitions that could be disrupted by contentious prioritization systems.
- Tools cannot be uniformly applied with equal success throughout a region; approaches that may work in some areas may be highly controversial in other contexts.
- Avoid paralysis due to disagreements about issues related to habitat (e.g. water rights, stocking of exotic species).
- Perception that progress is at the expense of other ongoing efforts that are equally critical for fisheries management.
- Land and water are becoming increasingly scarce resources, even as more species are being listed.
- The next generation may have little direct contact with the natural world, limiting their perception of resource quality. This lack of experience has an influence on what people are willing to do to protect or restore resources.

## 6. What are next steps at the regional level?

- Use a combination of existing efforts and strategies to create NFHI's approach; adapt practical models (e.g. NAWMP).
- IAFWA and USFWS agree to take a leadership role in coordinating and facilitating NFHI.
- Participants can be NFHI ambassadors among agency directors and partners.
- A regional committee could be formed to consider implementation, perhaps coordinated through entities such as MICRA and SARP.
- All states in a region could unite to identify priority areas and develop a hierarchy of project needs.
- Develop a management structure, including a coordinator and staff to spearhead this Initiative and keep it moving. Project coordinators might be received better if they are associated with a local or regional organization rather than a federal agency.

"Fisheries administrators must be integral to the development and implementation of the NFHI. As we identify common threats to habitat and create strategies to address those issues, IAFWA will be heavily involved in the process, ensuring that administrators' interests and concerns are adequately addressed."  
 — Doug Hansen, IAFWA/SFPBC

- Create a framework that supports existing local, state and regional programs as they find common ground; elevate their interests to a national level and increase their capacity for cooperative efforts.
- Determine national goals and set clear objectives to avoid unnecessary wading through hundreds of monitoring methods and frameworks.
- Do not place additional regulatory or administrative burdens on states; employ or

adapt federal funding mechanisms to which program managers are accustomed.

- Determine if joint ventures could serve fish habitat needs.
- Show successes.
- Recognize that progress in different regions can develop at different rates and ensure that this variation does not dilute support for NFHI.
- Outreach is key. A communications strategy is needed to convey that careless land use can negatively impact aquatic habitats—and not just locally, but to downstream and marine systems.



## ***Conclusions and Next Steps***

NFHI is a groundbreaking strategy. Many stakeholders view NFHI as essential for the future of the nation's fisheries and aquatic resources. Regional stakeholder meetings have generated significant momentum for the Initiative. The process is now at a critical stage to build support from key audiences and fulfill expectations of regional participants. Immediate next steps are indicated below.

### **Calendar of related meetings:**

- **August 22:** "Healthy Fish Habitats: Creating Benchmarks For Success" workshop will take place at the AFS Annual Meeting in Madison, Wis. (See below for more information.)

### **Recommendations from SFBPC and transfer to IAFWA leadership:**

- **August 13:** SFBPC's NFHI work group completes a report summarizing input from stakeholder meetings.
- **August 23:** SFBPC's NFHI working group will compile results and recommendations for next steps to further the Initiative.
- **September (TBA):** SFBPC meets to discuss stakeholders report.
- **September 26-30:** IAFWA Fisheries and Water Resources Policy Committee plans to address development steps at the IAFWA Annual Meeting in Atlantic City, N.J.

**Keeping everyone involved:** Stakeholders meetings chart an evolutionary process for NFHI. The planning committee will continue to use follow-up newsletters and other communications mechanisms to keep everyone updated and involved as the NFHI transfers leadership from the SFBPC to the IAFWA.

## ***Contact Us***

For questions regarding this report or to subscribe to the NFHI e-mail list, please contact: Jenny Peterson, D.J. Case and Associates at (574) 258-0100, [jenny@djcase.com](mailto:jenny@djcase.com).

For questions about scoping meetings or suggestions to improve the NFHI website, contact Doug Hobbs at (703) 358-2336, [doug\\_hobbs@fws.gov](mailto:doug_hobbs@fws.gov).

To discuss the role of the IAFWA and future partnerships, contact Eric Schwaab at (202) 624-7890, [eschwaab@sso.org](mailto:eschwaab@sso.org).

## ***Agencies and Organizations Represented at Stakeholder Meetings***

Over 195 individuals signed in at the scoping meetings, representing the following 77 organizations, including 37 state agencies, 8 federal agencies and 32 nongovernmental organizations.

State agencies:

Alaska Department of Fish and Game  
Arizona Game and Fish Department  
Arkansas Game and Fish Commission  
California Resources Agency  
Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection  
Georgia Department of Natural Resources  
Idaho Department of Fish and Game  
Illinois Department of Natural Resources  
Indiana Department of Natural Resources  
Iowa Department of Natural Resources  
Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks  
Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources  
Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries  
Maryland Department of Natural Resources  
Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife  
Minnesota Department of Natural Resources  
Missouri Department of Conservation  
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks  
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission  
Nevada Department of Natural Resources and Conservation  
New Hampshire Fish and Game Department  
New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife  
New Mexico Department of Game and Fish  
New York State Department of Environmental Conservation  
North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission  
North Dakota Game and Fish Department  
Ohio Department of Natural Resources  
Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation  
Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission  
South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Department  
Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency  
Texas Parks and Wildlife Department  
Utah Division of Wildlife Resources  
Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries  
Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife  
Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources  
Wyoming Game and Fish Department

Federal agencies:

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration  
National Park Service  
Natural Resources Conservation Service  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

U.S. Forest Service  
U.S. Geological Survey  
U.S. House of Representatives  
USGS Western Fisheries Research Center

Nongovernmental organizations:

American Fisheries Society  
American Sportfishing Association  
BASS Anglers Sportsman Society  
Bass Pro Shops  
Coastal Conservation Association  
Cook Inlet Aquaculture Association  
Ducks Unlimited  
Garcia and Associates  
Great Lakes Fishery Commission  
IAFWA  
Icicle Creek Watershed Council  
Izaak Walton League of America, Inc.  
Kenai River Sportfishing  
Loftus Associates  
Management Systems International  
Michigan State University  
Missouri Watershed Coalition  
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation  
Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission  
Northwest Marine Technology, Inc.  
Northwest Power & Conservation Council  
Pacific Coast Joint Venture  
Pure Fishing  
Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe Fisheries  
Southeast Watershed Forum  
State University of New York  
The Nature Conservancy  
Trout Unlimited  
University of Minnesota  
Wildlife Management Institute  
World Wildlife Fund