

**Agenda Item: 15-51 Review and Request Approval to Proceed for Public Comment for the 2015 Draft Coastal Habitat Protection Plan and Source Document**

**Explanation:**

The Fishery Reform Act requires that the NC Coastal Habitat Protection Plan be updated on five year cycles. The purpose of the plan is to enhance coastal fishery populations by implementing recommendations to protect, restore, and enhance the habitats they depend on. The plan is drafted by staff in the Department of Environmental Quality (Divisions of Marine Fisheries, Coastal Management, Water Resources, and Energy, Minerals, and Land Resources. The Environmental Review, Coastal Resources, and Marine Fisheries commissions are required to review the plan and approve of the plan recommendations. The 2015 draft plan has been reviewed by the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan Steering Committee, which includes two members of the Environmental Management Commission. This plan, in contrast to previous versions, has been shortened in length and focuses exclusively on non-regulatory actions that the department and commissions can work toward. An updated source document, that includes more details and the latest science on coastal habitats in NC, accompanies the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan. The plan recommendations address 1) enhancing coordination among agencies; 2) mapping coastal habitats and assessing linkages between habitat and fish; 3) protecting habitat from adverse physical impacts, and 4) improving water quality.

The Environmental Review, Coastal Resources, and Marine Fisheries commissions are required to review the draft plan and approve of the plan recommendations. Staff are seeking approval to take the draft plan out for public comment. Following the public meetings, the final draft plan will be presented to the Environmental Review Commission at their March meeting for approval of the plan recommendations.

**Recommendation:**

That the Environmental Management Commission approve of taking the draft 2015 Coastal Habitat Protection Plan out for public comment in December.