

**Restoration Goals, Quantitative Metrics and Assessment Protocols  
for Evaluating Success on Restored Oyster Reef Sanctuaries**

**Report of the Oyster Metrics Workgroup**

**Submitted to the  
Sustainable Fisheries Goal Implementation Team  
of the Chesapeake Bay Program.**

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## 1. Introduction

Concerted efforts over the past two decades to restore oyster reefs to the Chesapeake Bay have met with mixed success (1-4). A recent review of oyster restoration activities in Virginia and Maryland pointed to the lack of clear goals, established metrics of success, consistent sampling protocols and sufficient monitoring as contributing to our uncertainty surrounding their success (5). Monitoring activity has generally not been well coordinated with restoration activity, and different entities involved in the monitoring have used different sampling gear, monitoring approaches and assessment protocols. Despite explicit objectives of restoring ecological functions and ecosystem services provided by oyster reefs, few measures beyond the number of market-sized oysters have been used to judge success.

Executive Order 13508 *Strategy for Protecting and Restoring the Chesapeake Bay Watershed* established a goal of restoring oyster populations in 20 tributaries of Chesapeake Bay by 2025, further adding to the need to develop clear restoration goals, quantitative metrics and assessment protocols. This document represents an effort by state and federal agencies directly involved in oyster restoration in the Bay to develop clear and consistent objectives, definitions, sampling protocols and assessment techniques pursuant to achieving this goal and evaluating success.

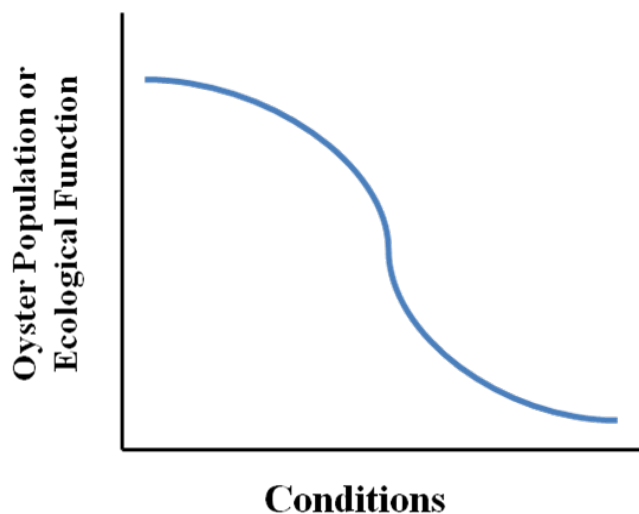
To address these issues the Sustainable Fisheries Goal Implementation Team (GIT) established a technical workgroup comprised of representatives from NOAA, USACE, MDNR, VMRC and academic scientists from UMCES and VIMS. The specific charge to the group was to develop common bay-wide restoration goals, success metrics and monitoring and assessment protocols for sanctuary reefs that include progress toward achieving a sustainable oyster population that ultimately will provide increased levels of ecosystem services. The charge for the group specifically excludes fisheries-specific metrics since it is limited to sanctuary reefs, though the oyster population metrics are certainly germane to fisheries management. It is also important to point out that the group was tasked with identifying a minimum suite of metrics that should be measured across all sanctuary reefs, particularly for the purpose of assessing progress toward the Executive Order oyster goal. We recognize that some sanctuary reefs will need to be monitored more intensely to address specific issues (research priorities, ancillary goals, etc.). The minimum suite of metrics laid out herein should in no way be seen as limiting such additional monitoring

and research activity. The workgroup recognizes that future research will inform oyster restoration practices, and strongly encourages the use of sound adaptive management practices. We view this report as a step towards a consensus document between the primary governmental agencies involved in oyster restoration in the Bay with respect to restoration goals, thresholds for success, and monitoring protocols. Our recommendations are informed by the best available science, restoration results to date, and the varying missions and resources of the agencies involved. As such, it accommodates the very different restoration approaches and observed success rates across different geographic areas of the Bay. We expect that, as the state of knowledge advances, targets and approaches outlined here will evolve.

## 2. Restoration Goals

The overarching goal of restoring a large oyster population, capable of providing valued ecosystem services and supporting a vibrant fishery, drives specific management actions and targets, such as those set forth in E.O. 13508. The crucial fact remains, however, that oyster populations in the Bay have undergone a dramatic regime shift over the past half century and that high natural mortality rates associated with disease, predation, siltation, and unaccounted harvest (poaching), along with negative shell budgets (i.e. shell loss rates > shell accretion rates) in many areas, pose significant challenges to achieving a greatly expanded oyster population. Implicit in the goal of restoring 20 tributaries is the notion that working on a tributary scale will be necessary to achieve sufficiently large changes in oyster populations.

Moreover, the cumulative effects of restoration activities are unlikely to be linear; that is, there is an expectation



**Figure 1.** Generalized representation of a threshold response in which improvement in conditions (towards the left) must exceed a critical value to return the system to a stable improved state (upward).

that it will be necessary to exceed several threshold values (e.g. in shell volume, larval supply and survival, disease tolerance, etc.) to achieve a regime shift that supports greater population abundance. Figure 1 provides a simplified depiction of this condition graphically and helps to make the point that restoration of oyster populations and the ecological functions they provide may require exceeding threshold improvements in environmental conditions.

*2.1. Tributary-level restoration* – Central to our task of developing clear goals and measures of success is establishing what constitutes restoration at the level of a tributary. Is the end product a population of a certain size? Or, is it a percentage of historical oyster habitats occupied by restored reefs? Are we seeking an operational definition related to the amount of restoration activity (shell, alternative substrate or seed planting) or a functional one in which a tributary is not restored until a greatly expanded, sustainable oyster population is achieved? These are not trivial issues to resolve. The workgroup spent substantial time considering these issues and it is important to review a number of caveats before setting final targets.

The intent of setting a goal of restoring oysters to 20 tributaries by 2025 is to undertake restoration at a sufficiently large scale to dramatically increase oyster populations and realize enhanced ecosystem services at a tributary-wide scale. The workgroup discussed this intent at length, defining it as a functional goal. *Specifically, the goal of oyster restoration at the tributary-level is to dramatically increase oyster populations and recover a substantial portion of the ecosystem functions provided by oyster reefs within the tributary.* In effect the goal is to return to the higher plateau represented in Figure 1. As restoration proceeds, the workgroup believes that it is essential that these functional goals remain the primary target.

Exactly what will be necessary to achieve these functional goals is unknown. Simply stated, it has not been done previously. We lack both an empirical and theoretical basis for knowing how much oyster reef restoration is necessary within a given tributary to reach our functional goals. Our underlying assumption is that achieving this goal will require the *successful functional restoration* of a significant proportion of the historical oyster reefs within a tributary. As discussed in the following section, many years of post restoration monitoring will likely be necessary to determine successful functional restoration at the reef level. Additionally, there are several practical limitations on the scale of restoration that can be undertaken within a given

tributary, including available restorable areas, the extent of private leases and designated fisheries bars, the availability of shell, and limits on the amount of spat-on-shell production.

Despite the ultimate goal of functional restoration success, restoration goals at the tributary level will need to include *operational goals*, e.g., the amount of shell planted or the quantity of spat-on-shell or the number of bars planted. The agencies and organizations involved in restoration must set operational targets for planning and staging their work. It is necessary, therefore, to establish target levels for restoration activity within a tributary that constitute operational or intermediate measures of success that facilitate restoration planning and implementation.

Unfortunately, there is no clear answer to how much oyster reef habitat within a tributary should be targeted for restoration. Comparing detailed surveys by Winslow in Tangier Sound (6) and by Moore in the James River (7) with the more general Yates (8) and Baylor (9) surveys in Maryland and Virginia, respectively, USACE estimated that approximately 40% of the areas included in the Yates and Baylor surveys were hard oyster habitat. Further, using available information, USACE has projected that 8-16% (40x20% to 40x40%) of historic (Yates and Baylor) habitat needs to be restored in a tributary to effect a significant change. Other significant considerations in setting these targets are observed degradation of historical oyster bottom and practical limits associated with the amount of reef area within a tributary that can realistically be set aside as sanctuaries and restored.

“Restorable areas” have, at a minimum, hard bottom that will support shells or alternative substrates deposited on the bottom in a restoration effort (i.e. they will not sink into mud or silt). Other considerations for restorable areas include availability of public bottom (not leased) and appropriate water quality. The amount of reasonably restorable area varies considerably among tributaries. Surveys of oyster bars conducted during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries provide our base maps for historical oyster distributions (6-9). The most recent comprehensive survey of the condition of the Maryland Bay Bottom was conducted between 1974 and 1983. More recent surveys (11, 12) have attempted to characterize the currently-viable habitat and estimate habitat loss. In Maryland, a recent estimate suggested that less than 10% of the areas formerly classified as supporting oysters currently had suitable substrate for oyster restoration (12). In Virginia, surveys conducted in the 1980s suggested that only about 20% of areas formerly classified as oyster bars were viable (11, 13). These estimates do not necessarily precisely characterize the

amount of bottom area that is suitable for restoration, but they do illustrate the point that conditions at many of the historical oyster bars are not currently favorable for conducting oyster restoration. In Virginia, an Oyster Restoration Atlas (14) has been developed by VIMS and VMRC, which incorporates the most recent substrate maps, the boundaries of public and leased oyster grounds, bathymetry and salinity in relation to current and potential restoration sites on a tributary by tributary basis. These maps not only target areas that are suitable for restoration, but make it quite clear that many areas are either not suitable or not available by nature of being privately leased. In Maryland, the Native Oyster Restoration and Aquaculture Development Plan designates some areas to be established as sanctuaries and others for aquaculture development, with other areas open to fishing. It is clear that tributaries will need to be selected for restoration based upon numerous criteria, including the amount of area suitable for restoration and how this area compares to the historic extent of oysters. Those with too little suitable area offer little chance for improvement, and those with too much are likely intractable.

These considerations lead us to recommend that tributaries slated for oyster restoration be carefully selected as those adequate in size to be meaningful, but not so large as to exceed reasonable expectations with available resources. Large-scale, tributary-based oyster restoration is in its infancy. Techniques and methods are only beginning to be identified and are largely untested at this scale. With this in mind, as well as recognized funding and resource limitations, it is recommended that small tributaries (creeks and small rivers) receive initial focus, given the tributaries meet other restoration criteria. (See Appendix A for examples of Chesapeake tributaries that fall into this size category.) It may also be reasonable to target geographically distinct sub-segments of larger tributaries for focused oyster restoration and still be consistent with the E.O. goal. Tributaries need to be further evaluated for the amount of available habitat that is suitable for restoration and the reality of establishing and maintaining the restoration sites as sanctuaries.

*In accordance with this analysis, the workgroup suggests that an operational goal of restoring 50 -100% of currently restorable oyster habitat represents a reasonable target for tributary-level restoration.* In selecting a tributary for focused restoration, it is also important to consider its historic oyster bottom where accurate data exist. As mentioned previously, USACE has projected

that 8-16% of historic oyster bottom habitat needs to be restored in a tributary to effect a significant change. *Thus, an ideal candidate tributary is one where 50-100% of the currently restorable bottom is equivalent to at least 8%, and preferably more, of its historic oyster bottom.*

Final judgments about the ultimate success of these activities in catalyzing a regime shift to greatly enhanced, sustainable oyster populations may not come until many years after the actual restoration activities are completed. Functional success metrics for gauging the ultimate success of these efforts are discussed in sections below.

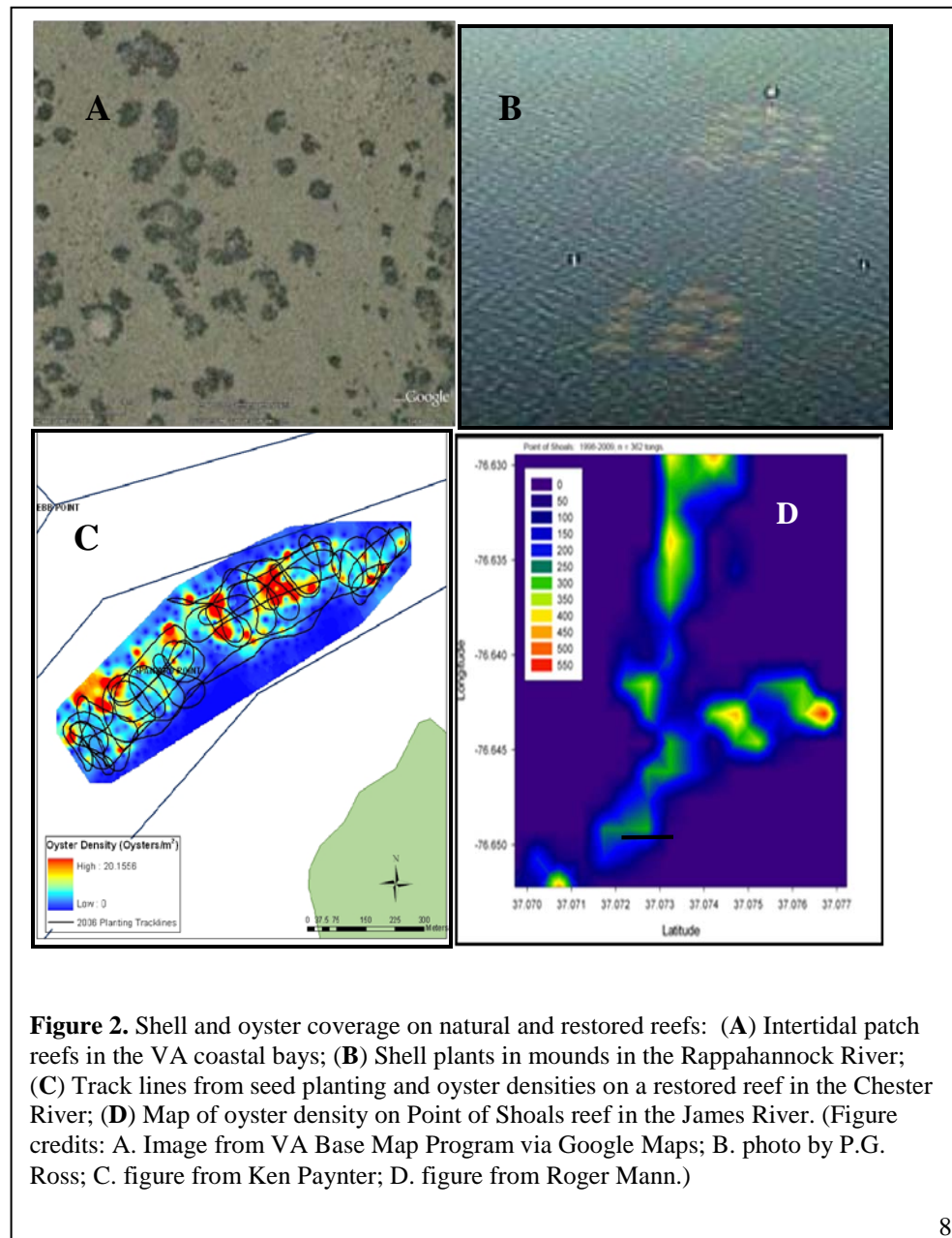
*2.2. Reef-level restoration* – Oyster restoration activity (planting of substrate or spat-on-shell) takes place at the level of an oyster bar (=reef). Again, however, we lack clear definitions of either operational or functional success at this level. Complete failure is easily observed as a lack of recruitment to planted shell, high mortality of planted seed, or the degradation and burial of shell before a population becomes established. Success, on the other hand, can be harder to define and quantify. Do we define operational success in restoring a reef only after 100% of that reef area has been planted with shell, alternative substrate or spat-on-shell? Or, is some lesser coverage sufficient? Is functional success achieved only when a threshold abundance of oysters (e.g., 100 oysters m<sup>-2</sup>) is established, or a target value of an ecosystem service (e.g., 500 kg N removed hectare<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup>) is reached? And, what is the time course over which this success is to be judged? Each of these requires some resolution if progress towards achieving the goal set forth in the E.O. is to be tracked in a consistent manner. We attempt to provide some clarity on these issues below.

Establishing operational goals and metrics is an imperative. Restoration activity on an individual bar must have a target value at the implementation phase. Do we target planting shell, alternative substrate or spat-on-shell on 100% of the bar before we consider our current activity at that bar complete or do we target planting 50% of the area, for instance? A relevant consideration here is that in their unexploited state oyster beds in the Chesapeake Bay did not exist as vast uniform reefs, but rather varied considerably in shape, size and degree of bottom coverage (6, 7, 15-17) with “hard-rock” and “mud-shell” areas occurring within an oyster bed (18). Practical considerations of planting techniques in current restoration practices also play a

role in variable coverage of oysters on a reef. Thus, it seems apparent that restoration of an oyster bar should target planting something less than 100% of the historical bar area.

Unfortunately, we have only limited information on which to base specific recommendations for the amount of coverage that should be targeted with shell, alternative substrate or spat-on-shell plantings. Figure 2A shows a spatial view of intertidal oyster reefs in the coastal bays along Virginia's Eastern Shore. Individual patch reefs, typically 2 – 3 m<sup>2</sup> in area are separated by 1 – 4 m and larger scale patterns of reef distribution appear to reflect flow patterns. We do not suggest that this pattern is typical of all subtidal reefs within Chesapeake Bay, but use it to illustrate that in a natural, seemingly healthy and stable oyster population that oysters do not

cover 100% of the bottom within an area that might reasonably be termed a reef. Historical accounts from subtidal reefs in the Chesapeake Bay indicate that “reefs”, even during the early phase of heavy exploitation, were not uniformly covered in oysters, but included extensive areas without oysters (6, 7). A lack of complete coverage of the bottom is





also evident in planting techniques currently in use (Fig. 2B, C) for planting shell and spat-on-shell in Virginia and Maryland, respectively, and on a natural reef in the James River (Fig. 2D).

There are two distinct reasons to establish minimal planting coverage operational targets: (1) to provide guidance on how much planting should be planned for a particular reef and (2) to establish a consistent approach to reporting the spatial extent of operationally restored reefs. In lieu of a more rigorously defined value, we suggest that at this time a minimum target of 30% coverage of a reef area be set as an operational practice. *That is, shell planting and spat-on-shell should result in a minimum of 30% of coverage of the restoration reef<sup>1</sup>.* We emphasize here that, as with the other targets that we are recommending, this minimum value represents a minimum consensus value that can be achieved across the range of restoration techniques and restoration sites in Chesapeake. For instance, it is reasonable that close to 100% coverage can be achieved at some restoration sites which receive shell only; however, areas in upper Bay for which spat-on-shell is the preferred restoration technique, 30% coverage of an oyster bar may be near the upper limited that can be practically achieved.

Operational targets for the oyster population size and structure within these planted areas also need to be established. Again, however, we lack a clear empirical or theoretical basis for setting these targets. We follow a few guiding principles in developing some tentative recommendations in this area. The first, and most compelling, is that our concept of a reef as a biogenic structure is unlikely to be achieved at very low densities of oyster ( $< 10$  and perhaps  $20$  adult oysters/m<sup>2</sup>). Indeed, the persistence of the reef itself is dependent upon densities above some minimal level. A positive shell budget will require sufficient numbers of oysters accreting at a rate that exceeds current sediment deposition and shell degradation rates, a condition that Mann and Powell (2) have pointed out is not currently achieved with many restoration efforts. In a successful modeling study of oyster populations in the James River, Mann and Evans (19) assumed, based upon a previous empirical study (20), that at a mean density of  $100$  oysters/m<sup>2</sup> fertilization efficiency was less than 10%. Because oysters are largely protandric

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<sup>1</sup> This recommendation is not intended to suggest that restoration activity should select a region of the target area that is only 30% of the total and concentrate shell or spat-on-shell planting only in that region. Rather, it is a recognition that even a natural or fully restored reef is not a monolithic structure fully covered in oysters and shell. 30% is intended only as a minimal acceptable coverage within the area that was actually planted.

hermaphrodites, with most larger, older individuals being females, achieving high reproductive success may require that multiple ages classes are present to ensure adequate numbers of males and females. A second area of guidance in developing oyster density or biomass targets comes from studies of ecosystem services provided by oyster reefs. Though we lack quantitative relationships between oyster density and the various ecosystem services that we are seeking to recover via restoration, the studies to date that have documented such services have, to our knowledge, done so on reefs with mean densities well above 20 adult oysters/m<sup>2</sup> (e.g., 21-35).

Though a firm basis for establishing optimal mean density and age structure targets is lacking, *the workgroup recommends that a mean density of 50 oysters/m<sup>2</sup> and 50 grams dry weight /m<sup>2</sup> containing at least two year classes, and covering at least 30% of the reef area provides a reasonable target operational goal for reef-level restoration.*<sup>2</sup> A mean oyster density of 50 adults/m<sup>2</sup> over 30% of the bottom is comparable to the mean oyster density in Maryland 100 years ago, which was 10-15 oysters/m<sup>2</sup> over an entire oyster bar (36). The target of having a minimum of two year classes reflects the need in low recruitment-low mortality areas in the upper Bay to ensure that as oysters from initial plantings age and progressively contain more females that a younger year class with more males is present ensure fertilization. Thus, this criterion requires attention to the age and sex ratio of the oysters on restored reefs and may require that additional year classes be added.

We note that reefs with much lower densities than the target above may be on a positive restoration trajectory, be viable, and warrant continued restoration efforts because they provide some level of ecosystem services, and could serve as spat settlement substrate in subsequent years. Thus, for the purpose of consistently tracking progress toward the E.O. goal, the *workgroup recommends a minimum threshold for a successful reef as a mean density of 15 oysters/ m<sup>2</sup> and 15 grams dry weight/ m<sup>2</sup> containing at least two year classes, and covering at least 30% of the reef area.* Reefs that meet this minimum threshold will be considered minimally successful for the purposes of tracking E.O. goal progress, although the target goal is not achieved. Again, this minimum threshold would require either 15 oysters >3 inches/m<sup>2</sup> or a larger number of smaller oysters to achieve 15 g dry weight/m<sup>2</sup>. Higher coverage with lower

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<sup>2</sup> Note that 3 inch oyster has a dry weight of approximately 1 gram, so this target would require 50 adult oysters/m<sup>2</sup> or many more small oysters.

mean densities does not qualify. Higher abundances without 15 g dry weight/m<sup>2</sup> does not qualify, nor does >15 g dry weight/m<sup>2</sup> with fewer than 15 oysters/m<sup>2</sup>. As with the minimal percent coverage target discussed above, this minimal value reflects a consensus view among the workgroup that accommodates those areas in the lower Bay for which high recruitment occurs, but that few oysters survive to greater than 3 inches. The workgroup believes the literature supports the establishment of a combination of minimum biomass, abundance and coverage for restoration to be deemed successful.

As noted above, a viable oyster reef must maintain a non-negative shell budget (2). Reef structure is itself necessary for the persistence of healthy benthic populations (24, 25), and influences the magnitude and type of ecosystem services provided. The basic tenet here is that structure should at a minimum be maintained, or ideally grow, from a post-restoration baseline to allow for reef sustainability. Restored structure to date generally consists of either shell mounds or alternative substrates (e.g., rock, crushed concrete, reef balls). Tracking the height, spatial extent, and shell budget on these areas over time is critical to understanding whether the structure is increasing, unchanged, or decreasing based on these metrics. Factors contributing to reef structural growth include natural spat set, oyster growth, set and growth of other hard-shelled organisms, and maintenance plantings of shell or seed oysters. Factors decreasing reef structure may include subsidence of constructed substrate and/or shell (e.g., post-construction subsidence into soft bottom), sedimentation, shell dissolution in excess of accretion, and illegal harvest activity. Thus, the workgroup recommends as *a structural goal that reef spatial extent, reef height, and shell budget should remain neutral or increase from a post-restoration baseline.*

Meeting operational targets does not, of course, ensure functional success of the restoration. The reality exists, however, that it may not be possible to determine functional success until at least several years after the initial restoration activity. The ultimate goal of restoring a reef is that it will persist as part of a larger *self-sustaining* population, with new substrate accruing or keeping pace with shell loss and providing desired ecosystem services. Limited success at achieving this goal at a greatly enhanced population level on a system-wide basis has led to the new emphasis on a tributary-scale approach to the problem with the hope that this will overcome some of the problems in the past. In the near-term an intermediate goal of *sustainable* reefs (for which some

ongoing intervention, such as shell or spat plantings may be repeated every few years) is more realistic than entirely self-sustaining reefs. *On a time horizon of 2 – 10 years following restoration activity, we suggest that a stable or positive shell budget, stable or increasing oyster biomass and multi-year class age distributions represent reasonable goals.* Comprehensive monitoring, employed in an adaptive management approach, can inform the need for additional restoration activity on specific reefs following initial restoration activity to meet this intermediate goal. Likewise, timely monitoring data will allow managers to make the less desirable decision to cease restoration activities on a particular reef if the minimum restoration thresholds are not being achieved. The workgroup recommends that a technical panel with representatives from each of the organizations be convened to explore a joint database for all monitoring data collected toward tracking the reef-level and tributary-level goals laid out herein as a mechanism of tracking progress toward the E.O. goal of restoring 20 tributaries. The Comprehensive Oyster Database being developed by NOAA's Chesapeake Bay Office may serve this purpose.

*2.3. Ecosystem services and ecological function* – Oyster restoration efforts in the Chesapeake Bay and elsewhere in the U.S. have been motivated over the past two decades as much by the desire to recover lost ecological functions and ecosystem services provided by oysters and the reefs they build as by the desire to rebuild fisheries. Several studies over the past few years have demonstrated that healthy or restored oyster reefs provide enhanced ecosystem services over unrestored or non-reef habitats, including the growth rate of seagrasses (28), the abundance, biomass and diversity of reef resident organisms (24, 25), the abundance, biomass and diversity of nekton (22, 29-34), water quality improvement (26, 37, 38), nutrient cycling (27, 38, 39) and shoreline stabilization (35). Setting specific targets for any of these ecosystem services or ecological functions as quantifiable goals for oyster restoration poses several practical constraints. First, we lack both a historical basis and appropriate current reference sites to set targets for most ecological functions of interest. We currently do not know, for instance, how much fish production or denitrification was associated with historical oyster reefs in the Chesapeake Bay or how much would be associated with fully restored reefs in the present. Second, we cannot quantify the level of any of these services provided by a restored reef by sampling on reefs alone. The quantity of an ecosystem service (e.g., increased water clarity or enhanced blue crab populations) provided by a reef or a series of reefs in a tributary cannot be

determined from sampling only on restored reefs, but requires comparisons to appropriate references areas in a well conceived BACI (Before-After-Control-Impact) design. Even in the uncommon situation when appropriate reference sites are available, the effects of restored oyster reefs on ecosystem services may be confounded by many other factors in the watershed and water body. We nevertheless appreciate the importance of evaluating the ecosystem services provided by oyster restoration activities and including these in our determinations of success. Thus, we outline an approach in the sections below on Assessment Protocols for estimating the ecological services provided by restored oyster reefs based upon combining the findings from experimental and/or modeling studies with routine reef monitoring.

### **3. Assessment Protocols**

Evaluating reef-level restoration success minimally requires the determination of several parameters: (1) structure of the restored reef (reef spatial extent, reef height, and shell budget), (2) population density (as individual abundance and biomass) and (3) a total reef population estimate (biomass). Although measurement of the first two and calculation of the third parameters are straightforward, they have been the source of some consternation in the past, so we will first clarify the issues before making specific recommendations.

*3.1. Reef area, height, shell budget* – Original reef boundaries in the Chesapeake were mapped in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century by using techniques such dragging a chain or probing the bottom with a pole (6-9). These techniques were adequate for coarse identification of broad areas with shell and oysters; however, it was recognized at the time (6, 7) and has been subsequently verified that these approaches did not accurately represent either the boundaries of the reefs or the heterogeneity within a reef. The practical implication of this today is that neither the Yates nor the Baylor surveys serve as appropriate benchmarks for scaling restoration targets.

Current-day techniques for assessing reef structural metrics include acoustic mapping, direct benthic sampling, under water video and aerial imagery. Acoustic mapping is a powerful tool for obtaining detailed bathymetric and textural information about bottom habitats, and may provide for simultaneously mapping reef boundaries and measuring reef spatial extent and reef height (as well as structural complexity). Acoustic mapping cannot be used in intertidal areas and

must be combined with groundtruthing to distinguish shell from live oysters or shell under thin layers of sediment. For shallow water reefs where acoustic mapping may be inefficient or impossible, aerial photography may provide an accurate means of assessing reef area (see Fig. 2B or the Google Earth image of the Hume Marsh reefs in the Lynnhaven River at 36°53'26.47"N, 76° 5'6.15"W), though this approach requires groundtruthing as well. Direct sampling coupled with high resolution GPS data can be used to map reef perimeters, but large sample numbers are required to accurately define the reef perimeter. On these shallow water reefs, height can be obtained using a rod and level method.

Quantitative samples taken for oyster population measures by patent tong or diver can be used to measure volume. Recommended assessment methodology for measuring and tracking shell budget on subtidal reefs is by patent tong. During surveys for oyster populations, retrieved shell volume can be measured in each tong grab. Shell quality can also be subjectively judged in several ways including an estimation of 'anoxic' or black shell vs. 'oxic' or brown shell. It should be noted that acoustic mapping techniques cannot determine shell quality. Expectations would be that shell volume surveyed in this way would reflect general decline, maintenance or increase over time.

The accurate determination of total reef area is critical to estimating the amount of restored area, oyster population abundance, and ultimately the quantity of ecosystem services provided by oyster restoration. The most appropriate method or combination of methods for assessing reef area will vary by region and reef types. The majority of the subtidal restoration activities will occur in depths where acoustic mapping technologies can be applied; in these areas, acoustic mapping with groundtruthing appears to be the most accurate and efficient method for assessing the structural characteristics of a reef, including reef spatial extent and should be pursued as the standard wherever possible. We stop short, however, of recommending this approach as a minimal monitoring requirement on all restoration projects. The important point is that accurate determination of total reef area is, in particular, critical to estimating the amount of restored area, oyster population abundance and ultimately the quantity of ecosystem services provided by oyster restoration. *Determination of reef area, height, and shell budget should be an integral part of the assessment of restoration success on sanctuary reefs.*

3.2. *Quantitative density estimates* – There is historical precedent in portions of Chesapeake Bay for estimating oyster abundance based upon timed dredge tows and there are widely recognized limitations to this approach including unknown sample area and the dependence of gear capture efficiency on sample volume (40, 41). Density estimates obtained in this manner are usually expressed as numbers of live oysters per bushel of shell, but conversion to numbers of live oysters per unit bottom area have also been developed by Rothschild and colleagues (42). It was not in the purview of this workgroup to design sampling protocols for oyster fisheries assessment, so we will leave it to others to determine the appropriate sampling technique for that use. *However, we recommend oyster density estimates on sanctuaries and other protected reef restoration sites be obtained from quantitative grab samples.* These samples may be obtained from quadrat samples excavated by divers or by patent tongs or, in shallow-water and intertidal sites, by direct access. We point out, however, that the capture efficiency of quadrat grabs and tongs is less than 100% and that there is the need for careful calibration of these techniques.

Monitoring costs by any of the methods above can be high, especially when there are large areas to be assessed. Thus, there is often pressure to keep sample replicates to a minimum. Accurate and precise estimates of mean abundances in highly patchy populations nevertheless may require large sample sizes. The sample size required to obtain a desired level of precision in the estimated mean or total abundance can be determined by plotting the relationship between the relationship between the standard error of the mean and sample size. We recommend that monitoring programs employ this approach and optimize sample allocations.

Confusion has occurred in recent years regarding the inclusion of grab samples that contain no oysters into estimates of mean density. This uncertainty arises because oyster reefs (even natural healthy ones) are not monolithic structures with oysters distributed uniformly within what we would define as the reef perimeter (see Fig. 2 and discussion in Section 2.2). Thus, as we assess progress towards restoring (and conserving) reefs, we need to come to grips with the fact that restored area does not precisely match the area with oysters. This situation is particularly well illustrated in Figure 2A which shows an area with natural intertidal patch reefs. The currently available information suggests that this represents a fully developed reef complex that is comparable in spatial extent and density (though perhaps not oyster size and biomass) to historical reefs in the region. Estimating the mean density of oysters on these individual patch

reefs (which average 2 – 3 m<sup>2</sup> in area) is straightforward, requiring only that we obtain adequate numbers of quantitative samples from randomly selected individual patch reefs over the area. The point of disagreement that has arisen is over how one determines either the total population size or the total area of restoration from these samples.

*3.3. Oyster population assessment* – In the intertidal situation represented in Figure 2A, the total population size of oysters in the reef complex is easily estimated as the product of the mean density on patch reefs and the total area of the individual patch reefs, because we can clearly count and measure the individual patch reefs within the area. The challenge emerges in subtidal reefs where obtaining a clear picture of the distribution of oysters prior to sampling is more difficult and costly. High-resolution side-scan sonar, coupled with extensive groundtruthing samples may provide such information precisely and reliably. *If current, validated maps of fine-scale reef distribution are available prior to quantitative density sampling, then sample allocation may be directed at those locations only and total population size estimated as in the intertidal example above.* In the more generalized case in which predetermined, high precision maps of oyster density or habitat quality are available, Wilberg (pers. com.) has shown that when underlying habitat strata explain a portion of the overall variance, stratified random sampling (STRS) provides a more precise estimate of total oyster abundance than simple random sampling (SRS) *for a given number of samples.* In the STRS scenario, regions within the reef of high, medium and low habitat quality are sampled in a stratified random design (see Fig. 2 C&D for maps of reefs exhibiting these conditions). This approach can provide a much more precise estimate of the true population abundance with far fewer samples than SRS (Wilberg, pers. com). This method is dependent upon the availability of high resolution maps reflecting the current reef conditions prior to sampling. Ideally these maps would be available and should be developed wherever possible; however, in the past such detailed knowledge about the underlying distribution of oysters on a reef has not always been available to guide sampling. When the underlying distribution of oysters (or even oyster habitat) within a restored reef is unknown or not known with sufficient accuracy, then a stratified sampling design is not possible. In this case two approaches have generally been used: systematic and simple random sampling (SRS). The systematic approach involves gridding out the sampling area and taking one sample from the centroid of each grid. The SRS approach has generally involved also gridding the sampling area,



but taking samples from a random subset of grids. This type of systematic survey will provide information on both the population and its distribution across the target area. If distribution is not important, an SRS will suffice for population estimate and coverage. The number of samples required will be determined by the variance among samples and should be adjusted to reduce the variance of the population estimate to the point where additional samples will only minimally affect the variance.

The data from either systematic or SRS surveys can be used to estimate population size (total abundance) within the target restoration area. Specifically, the mean density of oysters in all samples (including zeros) taken within the target restoration area is multiplied by the entire target area. This approach, however, may not provide a valid estimate of density on the actual reef(s) resulting from the restoration activity. Such an estimate requires that the actual extent of the reef be defined, either via pre- or post-stratification, and that samples only from the reef strata be used to determine density. The committee recommends that a stratified random survey design be used whenever data on strata are available. All restoration projects should collect pre-construction data in order to assess the project's success and cost-effectiveness by comparing post-construction data. When stratification is possible, restoration efforts should be surveyed considering the strata rather than using SRS. We note, however, that determining failure rate of a restoration activity is equally as important as determining success rate. Consequently, sampling in areas that received restoration activity, but did not result in the formation and persistence of a reef is a critical requirement of the evaluation process. We note that there are at least two ways in which such "failures" can occur—(1) operational errors in which shell or spat-on-shell planting took place outside of the target area and (2) burial of planted materials within the target area. Both have occurred in various restoration efforts in Chesapeake Bay. Thus, those strata should be sampled as well but perhaps not with the frequency of the 'successful' strata. The important point here is that monitoring programs should sample in a manner that allows several questions to be answered: *How successful was the restoration activity? What is the oyster abundance and biomass within the target area? What is the density and abundance of oysters on the resultant reef?*

Although a stratified random sampling design requires fewer samples than either a simple random sampling or systematic sampling design to achieve the same level of precision in

estimating population size under the conditions specified above, we stop short of recommending that all population assessments on restoration reefs employ a pre-sampling STRS design for two reasons. First, we are not in a position to affirm that the technical resources (side-scan sonar or video imagery) will always be available to parties conducting these assessments in a timely fashion. More importantly, we have not evaluated the cost effectiveness of the various approaches. That is, it might be more cost effective for an agency to take many SRS than to conduct acoustic bottom surveys and take fewer STRS to achieve the same level of precision in estimating oyster population size. The important point here is that it is incumbent upon each monitoring program to employ a sample design that provides oyster population estimates with good accuracy and precision.

We emphasize that accurate and precise estimates of the total population size on a restored reef require that the actual extent of the reef be determined during post-restoration monitoring. Actual extent of the restored reef may differ from the target restoration area, both in the extent within the target area and expansion outside of the target area.

3.4. *Assessment Frequency*- The question ‘At what point in time can we call a reef restored?’ is not an easy one to answer, but the workgroup believes it is an essential part of our initial charge to come to consensus on this for the purpose of tracking progress toward the E.O. goal.

*The recommended minimum assessment intervals for reef-level goals is established at 1) post-restoration activity to establish baseline (within 6 to 12 months of restoration activity); 2) again at three years post-activity; and 3) again at 6 years post-activity.* The group recognizes that there is additionally a need for basic pre-construction monitoring to support site selection and gauge the accomplishments of restoration actions. Pre-construction monitoring should be designed based on the goals of the restoration project and the resources available. This, however, is not purview of this workgroup.

More frequent and intensive monitoring will likely be required, and is highly encouraged, on some restoration projects to facilitate, for example, research projects or ancillary goals. The above intervals are established only as *minimum* frequencies for assessment, and are in no way meant to preclude more frequent monitoring. The initial post-restoration assessment is essential

for establishing a baseline against which to evaluate future project success. The three-year point is critical to allow for adaptive management. If, for example, a project shows at this point signs of needing additional seed or shell, a management decision can be made to do so to increase the likelihood of success. Conversely, the decision may be made that the project was poorly constructed, poorly sited, used inappropriate materials, etc., and that continued investment is ill advised. Determining the *causes* of failure is, of course, essential to adaptive management. Measuring parameters such as dissolved oxygen, pH, temperature, salinity, disease levels and sedimentation rates can help determine why failure occurred, allow for adaptive management, and avert recurrence.

By consensus, this workgroup establishes the six-year assessment as a reasonable point at which to determine whether a reef is ‘successful’ for tracking progress toward the E.O. goal.

*Ecosystem services and ecological function* – In Section 2.3 we indicated that monitoring alone would not be sufficient for assessing the level of ecosystem services provided by a restored oyster reef. Because this is an important concept, we will explain this assertion further and then recommend an assessment strategy that we believe is appropriate.

Most of the ecological functions and ecosystem services that we desire from a restored oyster reef are affected by a great many other factors. For instance, water clarity is affected by atmospheric and terrestrial inputs, phytoplankton dynamics and meteorological conditions, among other things. Thus, measuring changes in water clarity in a tributary and attempting to link those changes to oyster restoration success is highly problematic. Indeed, even as an increasing oyster population filters more water, changing land use practices could cause water clarity to decline. Similarly, measuring utilization of a restored reef by finfish does not account for numerous other factors (e.g., recruitment, natural mortality and fishing mortality) that may be affecting regional fish population size. Comparisons to a nearby non-reef control site may overcome some of these uncertainties; however, such a monitoring scheme quickly becomes intractable to do at all restoration sites.

A much more tractable approach is to make use of the results from targeted monitoring programs, controlled experiments and modeling studies to develop generalizable relationships

between characteristics of an oyster reef (e.g., reef size, oyster abundance, oyster biomass, reef complexity or other measures) and the quantity of various ecosystem services. For instance, if a carefully designed study was to estimate:

$$\text{Biodeposition} = f(\text{reef size, oyster biomass, total suspended solids [TSS] and temp.}),$$

then routine monitoring of reefs at other sites together with measurements of TSS could be used to estimate biodeposition provided by those reefs. Similarly, if a controlled, replicated experiment was used to generate a relationship between the numbers (or biomass) of oysters on a reef and the resulting amount of additional finfish production, then routine monitoring of oyster population characteristics described above could be used to estimate potential finfish production associated with restored reefs in varying conditions. As a final example, if controlled, replicated experiments were employed to quantify nitrogen fluxes from the sediment as a partial function of oyster biomass (as well as temperature and seston concentrations), then routine monitoring data could be used to estimate nitrogen fluxes attributable to a particular restored reef.

Apart from the obvious benefits of feasibility, this approach towards evaluating success of reef restoration relative to ecosystem services provides a means of estimating the amount of ecosystem services provided by restored reefs that vary in their success. That is, hypothetically, a reef with 100 g dry weight biomass  $\text{m}^{-2}$  may provide 20-times the nitrogen removal capacity of an unrestored reef, while a reef with only 10 g dry weight biomass  $\text{m}^{-2}$  may provide only 5-times the removal capacity.

Determining such relationships will require carefully designed monitoring, experimental or modeling studies conducted over the next several years. We are careful here not to identify specific ways in which these relationships should be determined acknowledging that it will require creative studies by various investigators. As long as those studies equate absolute or relative values of ecosystem services to quantitative metrics related to the oyster population or reef characteristics that are being measured as part of a routine monitoring program, then they will provide the best means available of assessing success in this area. *Funding these types of studies will be neither cheap nor politically popular, but we emphasize that they are the only reliable means of quantitatively assessing the ecosystem services associated with reef restoration*

*and they are much less expensive than attempting to directly measure ecosystem services on all restored reefs.*

#### **4. Evaluating Success**

As stated previously, success in oyster restoration efforts will need to be evaluated on several levels over varying spatial and temporal scales. Targets and metrics of operational success are required to guide restoration activity, such as what percentage of a historical bar or other area should be planted with shell or spat-on-shell. Monitoring of individual reefs following initial restoration activity will be required to determine success at various stages by evaluating recruitment success, early post-settlement or post-planting survival, natural mortality, disease status, growth, reproduction and shell accumulation. Evaluating success at the tributary level likewise will need to involve operational definitions about the amount of area within the tributary that needs to be rehabilitated and functional measures of the status of those areas several years after the restoration activity. Table 1 summarizes the goals, assessment protocols and success metrics that we have discussed above.

**Table 1.** Summary of goals, assessment protocols, assessment frequency and success measures

Goal	Success metrics (targets and/or thresholds)	Assessment Protocol	Minimum Assessment Frequency (assumes pre-restoration survey)
<b><i>Operational Goals:</i></b> Defined programmatic and planning outcomes for reef construction and tributary level restoration			
<b>Reef-level</b> 1. Appropriate amount of substrate and/or spat-on-shell was planted. 2. Presence of substrate and/or spat-on-shell within the target area.	Shell, alternative substrate, or spat-on-shell should cover a <u>minimum</u> of 30% coverage <u>throughout</u> the target reef area.	Patent tong or diver grabs	Within 6-12 months of restoration activity
<b>Tributary-level target:</b> 1. Appropriate amount of area within the tributary has met reef-level operational goals.	A <u>minimum</u> of 50% of currently restorable area that constitutes at least 8% of historic oyster habitat within a given tributary meets the reef-level goals defined above.	GIS-based analysis of restoration activity within the tributary	Annual
<b><i>Functional Goals:</i></b> The desired ecological outcomes at reef and tributary scales			
<b>Reef-level goals</b>			
Significantly enhanced live oyster density and biomass	<u>Target:</u> An oyster population with a <u>minimum</u> mean density of 50 oysters <u>and</u> 50 grams dry wt/m <sup>2</sup> covering at least 30% of the target restoration area at 3 years post restoration activity. Evaluation at 6 years and beyond should be used to judge ongoing success and guide adaptive management. <u>Minimum threshold:</u> An oyster population with a mean density of 15 oysters and 15 grams dry wt biomass · m <sup>-2</sup> covering at least 30% of the target restoration area at 3 years post restoration activity. Minimum threshold is defined as the lowest levels that indicate some degree of success and justify continued restoration efforts.	Patent tong or diver grabs	Minimum 1, 3 and 6 years post restoration
Presence of multiple year classes of live oysters	Minimum of 2 year classes at 6 yrs post restoration.	Patent tong or diver grabs	Minimum 3 and 6 years post restoration

**Table 1 (cont.)**

Positive shell budget	Neutral or positive shell budget.	Quantitative volume estimates shell (live and dead) per unit area	Minimum 1, 3 and 6 years post restoration
Stable or increasing spatial extent and reef height	Neutral or positive change in reef spatial extent and reef height as compared to baseline measurements.	Multi-beam sonar, direct measurement, aerial photography	Within 6 -12 months post-restoration, and 3 and 6 years post restoration
<b>Tributary-level goals</b>			
Expanding oyster population beyond the restored reefs	Will need to be determined as restoration proceeds.	Quantitative assessment of oyster populations throughout the tributary.	Will need to be determined from future assessments.
Return of the oyster population within a tributary to an enhanced stable state.	Specific targets will need to be developed on a tributary-specific basis as restoration proceeds.	Quantitative assessment of oyster populations throughout the tributary.	Will need to be determined from future assessments.
Enhanced ecosystem services in the tributary	Currently unknown. Specific targets will likely be informed by the results of experiments relation ecosystem services to structural metrics.	Determine relationships between structural reef characteristics (e.g., reef size, oyster abundance, or oyster biomass) and the quantity of various ecosystem services via controlled experiments and modeling studies. Use measured values of structural metrics to estimate levels of specific ecosystem services.	Currently unknown

## **5. Applying Adaptive Management**

Throughout this document we refer to applying adaptive management principles to restoration techniques and activities (e.g. placing subsequent additions of shell or spat-on-shell as informed by monitoring data). But, adaptive management means more than simply adjusting techniques. It means gathering data to answer specific questions at known decision points. For instance, in areas with only intermittent recruitment, it may mean monitoring shortly after the potential recruitment period to make a decision about the need to use spat-on-shell at that location. More fundamentally, fully adaptive management makes use of knowledge gained through data collection to refine both targets and metrics in route to meeting its ultimate goal. This will almost certainly be the case for oyster restoration in Chesapeake Bay. We have suggested restoration targets in this document that reflect the experiences not only of the workgroup members, but their organizations and the consulting scientist. There was seldom unanimity of opinion and in some cases our recommendations represent compromises between organizations; in others; they can be described as informed guesses. We strongly encourage those organizations involved in efforts to restore oyster populations and the ecosystem services that they provide in Chesapeake Bay to a higher stable state (Fig. 1) to rigorously evaluate and reassess the targets and the metrics established here as more data becomes available.



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## Appendix A

### The Nature Conservancy River Size Classification

The Nature Conservancy has developed a stream size classification for the eastern U.S. based on watershed size (upstream drainage area in square miles) as listed below:

Headwaters (<3.861 sq.mi.)

Creeks ( $\geq 3.861 < 38.61$  sq.mi.)

Small Rivers ( $\geq 38.61 < 200$  sq. mi.)

Medium Tributary Rivers ( $\geq 200 < 1000$  sq.mi.)

Medium Mainstem Rivers ( $\geq 1000 < 3861$  sq.mi.)

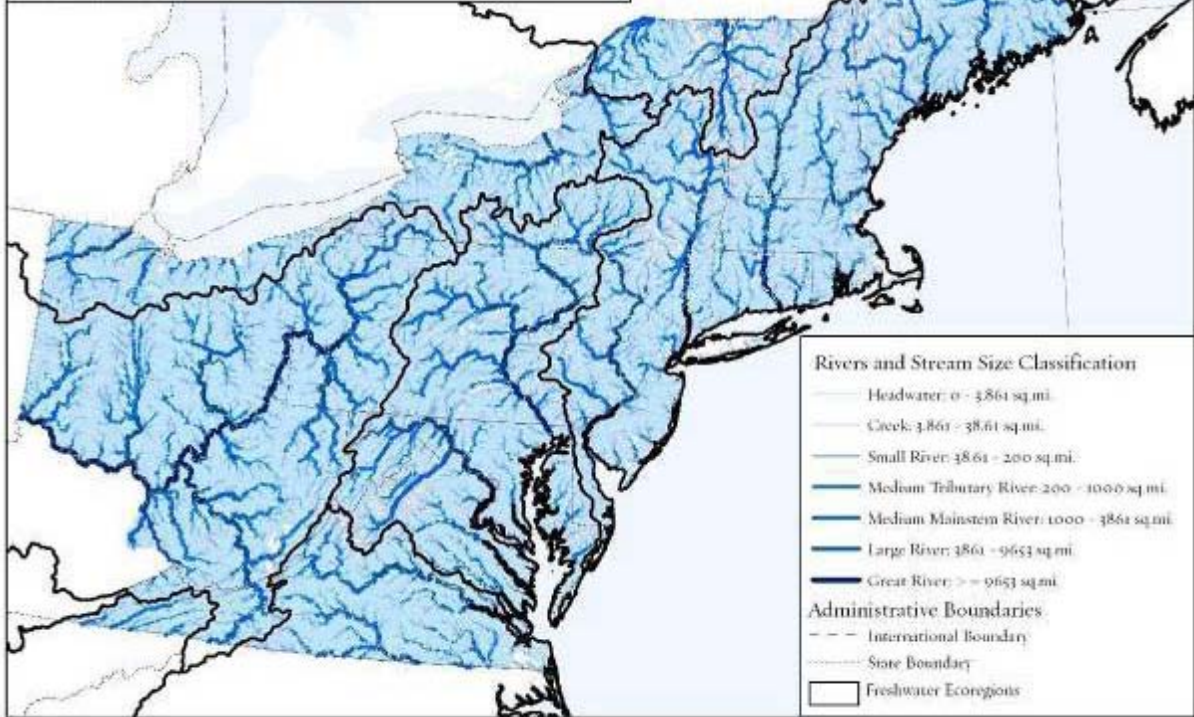
Large Rivers ( $\geq 3861 < 9653$  sq.mi.)

Great Rivers ( $\geq 9653$  sq.mi.)

The size breaks were initially developed as part of TNC's Northeast Aquatic Stream classification project for the Northeast Association of Fish and Wildlife (NEAFWA) (<http://rcngrants.org.spatialData>, see map below). The stream classification is regional and is appropriate to apply across the northeast region and within the Chesapeake Bay watershed. All 13 northeast states participated and contributed to its development. According to TNC, the classification has been used in a number of regional projects for planning and reporting. The table below shows the application of the stream classification to some of the tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay.

<b>Tributary</b>	<b>TNC classification</b>	<b>Tributary</b>	<b>TNC classification</b>
<b>MARYLAND</b>		<b>VIRGINIA</b>	
<b>Chester River</b>	medium trib	<b>James River</b>	great river
Corsica River	Small river	Elizabeth River	small river
<b>Choptank River</b>	medium mainstem	Nansemond River	medium tributary
Broad Creek	Creek	<b>Pocomoke Sound</b>	(medium tributary)
Harris Creek	Creek	<b>Rappahannock River</b>	medium mainstem
Little Choptank	Small river	Corrotoman River	small river
<b>Eastern Bay</b>	Small river	<b>York River</b>	medium mainstem
<b>Patuxent River</b>	medium trib	Back River	small river
<b>Potomac River</b>	great river	Cherrystone Inlet	small river
St. Mary's River	small river	Cockrell Creek	creek
<b>Tangier Sound</b>	(small river)	Great Wicomico R.	small river
Big Annemessex River	small river	Hungars Creek	creek
Fishing Bay	medium trib	Little Wicomico R.	creek
Little Annemessex River	small river	Lynnhaven Bay	small river
Manokin River	small river	Mobjack Bay	(small river)
Monie Bay	(small river)	Nandua Creek	creek
<b>Honga River</b>	small river	Nassawaddox Creek	creek
<b>Magothy River</b>	small river	Occohannock Creek	creek
<b>Rhode River</b>	creek	Old Plantation Creek	creek
<b>Severn River</b>	small river	Onancock Creek	creek
<b>South River</b>	small river	Piankatank River	small river
<b>West River</b>	creek	Poquoson River	small river
		Pungoteague Creek	small river
		Severn River	small river

Data Source:  
Northeast Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (NEAFWA) Aquatic Habitat Map 2008. Prepared by:  
The Nature Conservancy Eastern Conservation Science Office.  
Based on source hydrography from U.S.G.S. National Hydrography Dataset Plus 1:100,000, 2006.  
Political Boundaries from ESRI



## Appendix B: Consulting Scientists

The members of the Sustainable Fisheries Goal Implementation Team, and the Workgroup Members, extend sincere appreciation to the following consulting scientists for their role in reviewing and commenting on this document:

Rom Lipcius	Virginia Institute of Marine Science
Tom Miller	University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science
Roger Mann	Virginia Institute of Marine Science
Don Meritt	University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science
Mark Bryer	The Nature Conservancy
Denise Breitburg	Smithsonian Environmental Research Center
Steve Giordano	NOAA
Jay Lazar	NOAA
Brian Rothschild	University of Massachusetts
Phil Jones	Maryland Environmental Service
Chris Guy	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Mike Wilberg	University of Maryland- Chesapeake Biological Laboratory
Elizabeth North	University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science
Peter Bergstrom	NOAA
Dave Schulte	U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
John Hoenig	Virginia Institute of Marine Science



**Appendix C:** Adoption Statement, as signed by the executive committee of the Sustainable Fisheries Goal Implementation Team

*Sustainable Fisheries Goal Implementation Team Executive Committee*

*ADOPTION STATEMENT*

Restoration Goals, Quantitative Metrics and Assessment Protocols  
for Evaluating Success on Restored Oyster Reef Sanctuaries

A product of the Oyster Metrics Workgroup  
as convened by the  
Sustainable Fisheries Goal Implementation Team  
of the Chesapeake Bay Program

*We*, the undersigned, adopt the results and metrics provided by the Oyster Metrics Workgroup for the restoration of oysters within the Chesapeake Bay according to Executive Order 13508 *Strategy for Protecting and Restoring the Chesapeake Bay Watershed*.

We agree to work together to implement the recommendations from the Oyster Metrics Workgroup and restore oyster populations in 20 tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay by 2025. We further validate the need for clear restoration goals, quantitative metrics and assessment protocols.

We agree to accept this report, which provides target operational goals and minimum thresholds for reef and tributary-level restoration; and presents guidance on monitoring protocols. We understand that we will need to apply adaptive management principles to oyster restoration techniques and activities and that the recommended targets and metrics will need to be evaluated and reassessed as more data on oyster restoration becomes available.

December 19, 2011

Sustainable Fisheries Goal Implementation Team Executive Committee

FOR NOAA

*[Signature]*

FOR MD-DNR

*Thomas J. O'Connell*

FOR DC-DDOE

*Ben T. King*

FOR PRFC

*[Signature]*

FOR VMRC

*Robert L. O'Riordan*

FOR ASMFC

*[Signature]*

FOR USACE

*Mark Mansfield*