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Estuary program celebrates 25 years, new beginnings

RALEIGH – An environmental program is celebrating its 25th birthday with a new name and changes that will enable better management of a key coastal estuary in Virginia and North Carolina.

The Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Program was created Nov. 14, 1987 with the launch of a study of the estuary. Protection of the Albemarle-Pamlico estuary, which serves as a key nursery area for coastal fish and shellfish, has been vital to the fishing and tourism industries in the two states.

Last week, North Carolina Gov. Bev Perdue signed Executive Order #133, which restructures the program and renames it the Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Partnership.

“Over the past 25 years, this program has led or supported hundreds of initiatives to restore and protect the sounds while engaging the public,” said Bill Crowell, the partnership’s director. “Our name change reflects the simple proposition that effective stewardship of our sounds requires an effort beyond any single program or agency. Residents, businesses, nonprofit groups, academic institutions, and all levels of government have a stake in the effective management of our estuarine resources.”

Perdue’s Executive Order also streamlines the partnership’s advisory structure by merging two of its committees into one and directing the program’s committees to make decisions based on the key provisions in the estuary’s 10-year management plan, which was adopted in March.

Covering 3,000 square miles, the Albemarle-Pamlico estuary is among the largest in the nation. Estuaries are areas where river and ocean waters mix, supporting a rich array of terrestrial and aquatic life.

“Among our historic successes, the program has been instrumental in spurring the creation of the Clean Water Management Trust Fund and the development of the Estuarium in Washington,” Crowell said. “The program has also led or financed more than 100 applied research studies.”

Recent successes for the program include mapping of aquatic grasses in North Carolina, financial support for large-scale restoration efforts along the estuarine coastline, extensive field training for hundreds of K-12 teachers, and technical assistance for communities improving their wastewater treatment systems.

Congress in 1987 designated the Albemarle-Pamlico area an “estuary of national significance” and created the National Estuary Program. The partnership is one of 28 such estuary programs in the United States.

For more information, see www.apnep.org, or contact Jim Hawhee, the partnership’s policy and engagement manager, at 919-707-8632 or jim.hawhee@ncdenr.gov.

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