

Summer 2026 Newsletter

Summer is a busy time of year for APNEP, but also one of our favorites. We've published updates to our seagrass assessment, welcomed summer interns, gotten out in the field, and much more! Read on to learn more about what we and our partners have been up to the last few months.



APNEP's Quantitative Ecologist, Tim Ellis, demonstrating how to survey seagrass with STEM Policy Fellow, Riley Ragain.

SAV Team's Publishes 2026 Metric Report

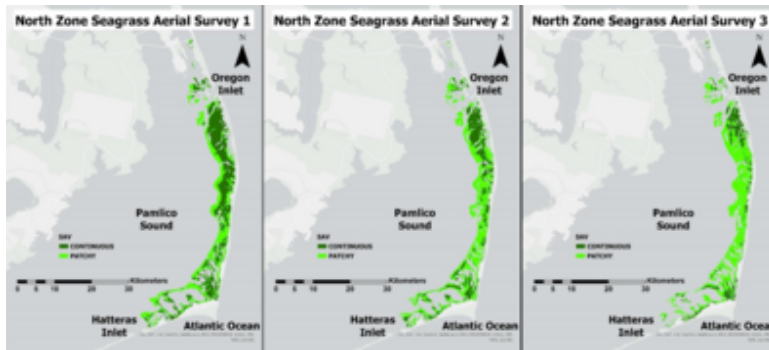
The amount of seagrass in North Carolina's estuaries has decreased more than 16% over a 14-year period, according to APNEP's new assessment of survey data between 2006 and 2020. APNEP and partners have since intensified and expanded seagrass monitoring efforts, completing surveys of the Albemarle-Pamlico estuary from 2021 to 2025 that will support future assessments of this valuable resource. Additionally, a flight was conducted this June to enable

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future analysis of this critical resource.

Check out our [recent press release](#) for more information and to read the full report.



Seagrass location and spatial cover classes (continuous and patchy) in the North Zone during Surveys 1 (2006-2007), 2 (2013) and 3 (2020).

State Budget Update

North Carolina's state budget was signed by Governor Josh Stein on July 7, 2026, and it includes impactful changes and continuations in funding for APNEP. We are fortunate to have been included in the Budget for two additional years of \$850K for [Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan](#) (CCMP) implementation. APNEP has also received an additional \$200K for submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) mapping and monitoring. Both of these funding sources aid in APNEP's ability to implement the CCMP.



Seagrass in Beaufort, NC near Rachel Carson Reserve.

870 Acres Protected in Southeastern Virginia

The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) has

[acquired 870 acres](#) of forests and wetlands in the City of Suffolk from The Nature Conservancy (TNC). With support from [Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program](#) at the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, DCR is working closely with TNC to bring one of the largest unprotected blocks of contiguous forest in the nationally significant Albemarle-Pamlico watershed region into Virginia's natural area preserve system. DCR is working with the [Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Partnership's Tribal Coastal Resilience Connections](#) and the [Indigenous Conservation Council of the Chesapeake Bay](#) to explore historic Tribal Nation and Community connections to the property.



The property holds huge promise for habitat restoration, environmental resilience, and public access. Photo credit: VA DEQ

APNEP's First STEM Policy Fellow

Since 2021, [NC Sea Grant](#) has hosted the [STEM Policy Post-Graduate Fellowship](#). The fellowship places graduate students from universities across North Carolina in full-time, year-long positions in various government offices, focusing on policy topics related to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

Last summer, APNEP was fortunate to welcome its first STEM Policy Fellow, Riley Ragain. During her time with APNEP she conducted a comprehensive policy and regulatory analysis of everything that affects SAV in North Carolina from mariculture, development, water quality, and more. Ragain completed her fellowship at the end of June, and we wish her luck with her career moving forward. Her policy analysis will be made publicly available later this year via APNEP's website.

If you would like to learn more about Riley and her project, [check out this blog!](#)



Riley Ragain pictured with seagrass in hand.

Grant Opportunities

- **[NFWF Conservation Partners Program](#)**
Accelerate the voluntary adoption of regenerative agriculture principles and conservation practices on private working lands. Grant awards will range from \$250,000 to \$750,000, with an estimated average grant size of \$500,000. Proposals are due Wednesday, July 22, 2026 by 11:59 PM ET.
- **[FY2027 Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership Funding Cycle](#)**
Restore and conserve habitat necessary to support coastal, estuarine-dependent, and diadromous fish species along the U.S. Atlantic Coast. ACFHP anticipates supporting 2-3 projects ranging from \$35,000 – \$100,000 in FY2027. The RFP closes Friday, September 25, 2026.
- **[SARP-USFWS-NFHAP Aquatic Habitat Restoration Program](#)**
Supports on-the-ground aquatic habitat restoration projects that enhance recreational, commercial, subsistence, or traditional fishing opportunities through habitat improvements and public access, that benefit the local economy, and that have a public educational component. For more information, contact SARP Coordinator, [Todd Ewing](#).

Please email Natalie.Ivey@apnep.org if there are other grants you'd like added to APNEP's [Grant Opportunities](#).

Out and About

APNEP Director, Bill Crowell, and Partnership Coordinator, Natalie Ivey, attended the fifth stop of the [Discover the Reserve](#) tour at Kitty Hawk Woods Reserve. Attendees also learned about the Division of



Coastal Management's [Public Beach and Water Access](#) and [Resilient Coastal Communities Programs](#), as well as the functions of Marine Patrol. Thank you to the NC Coastal Reserve for hosting this event!

Stacey Feken, APNEP's Policy and Engagement Manager, was recognized alongside Woody Webster (Buckridge Site Manager, NC Coastal Reserve) and Whitney Jenkins (Training Coordinator, NC Coastal Reserve) with a NC Dept of Environmental Quality (DEQ) Team Achievement Award for their efforts on the Scuppernong Engagement Strategy Team! The award was presented by DEQ Secretary, Reid Wilson. To learn more about their efforts and the Scuppernong Regional Water Management Study, view APNEP's [dedicated webpage](#).



This sign may look familiar to those of you who spend time on North Carolina's coast. Since 1981 the Division has awarded about \$1 million a year in matching grants to local governments for projects that improve public access to the state's beaches and

waterways. The fund exists to aid with the growing desire for public access sites caused by increasing coastal populations and private development. If you are on estuarine or oceanfront shoreline and are interested in the DCM Public Beach and Coastal Waterfront Access Program, visit [this informational page](#), or use the [interactive public beach and waterfront access map](#) to find sites to enjoy!

APNEP [Citizen Advisory Committee](#) (CAC) member Mary-Margaret McKinney published her first paper out of her PhD research on socio-ecological methods to improve salt marsh restoration and retention in coastal North Carolina. If you would like to read "Plant-Microbe Associations in Response to Environmental Stressors to Enhance Salt Marsh Restoration," visit [Springer Nature](#).



The Falls lake Dam, like many others in the Albemarle-Pamlico region, plays an important role in the flow of water through our landscape and



into our homes. To learn more about the human and ecological impacts of dams and current drought effects, [read our recent blog!](#)

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