**NOAA will focus on Choptank**

Source : Star Democrat

Posted: Wednesday, May 7, 2014 5:30 am | *Updated: 8:52 pm, Wed May 7, 2014.*

<http://www.stardem.com/news/local_news/article_fa103dde-22f8-5a4a-9d8c-3469164ed87c.html>

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CAMBRIDGE — The Choptank River Complex was chosen by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration as one of two areas in the nation to be a Habitat Focus Area. Habitat Focus Areas are places NOAA has identified where it can increase the effectiveness of its habitat conservation science and management efforts. The Choptank River Complex includes the Choptank and Little Choptank rivers. Its headwaters in Delaware make the Choptank River the longest river on the Delmarva Peninsula.

NOAA plans to work with the local community to build off and enhance existing conservation actions and management, and are also collaborating with federal and state bodies and conservation and environmental organization to address the growing challenges of coastal and marine habitat loss and degradation.

It’s good news for Tom Fisher, a professor at the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science’s Horn Point Laboratory in Cambridge who has intensely studied the issues in the Choptank River Complex. When NOAA preliminarily identified areas it was considering to be Habitat Focus Areas, Fisher said he pushed for the Choptank River Complex because of the loss of oyster and fish and water quality degradation in the watershed.

“What’s been happening is that due to growth in the towns and increasing wastewater discharges, as well as intensifying agriculture in rural areas, the amount of nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment being exported off the land have been increasing over time,” Fisher said about the non-tidal, freshwater parts of the basin. He said that information is based off 50-year U.S. Geological Survey numbers.

In the tidal estuary at the U.S. Route 50 bridge, Fisher said Chesapeake Bay Program records show that surface water there is becoming more green and has more algae present in the water. The water there has also become less transparent over time, and bottom water in the summer has declining oxygen levels.

“We’re approaching a dead zone at that part of the Choptank,” said Fisher, who’s worked at Horn Point Laboratory for more than 30 years. “We’re not there yet, but it’s heading in that direction.” According to NOAA, the historical loss of wetlands in the upper Choptank River subwatershed is estimated at 47,400 acres, or 11 percent of the total watershed areas.

Fisher said the declining water quality is just going to override projects like the Maryland Department of Natural Resource’s Harris Creek oyster sanctuary if the problems with water quality, nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment inputs are not resolved.

NOAA laid out some objectives for the watershed, including rebuilding native oyster and important fish populations, documenting and quantifying the benefits of oyster reefs associated habitats provide, and improving the decision-making and resilience of coastal communities by improving the delivery of NOAA’s habitat and climate science.

In addition to continuing work in the 190-acre Harris Creek oyster sanctuary, NOAA plans to map and characterize tidal water habitats and near-shore habitats, identify priority areas for restoration and conservation, explore removal of fish blockages in the Choptank River, identify priority wetlands restoration sites, and engage coastal communities to ensure their increased involvement.

According to NOAA, data generated through its monitoring programs will help managers address future challenges due to storm flooding, sea level rise, barrier island movement, degraded water quality and wetland loss.

“The Choptank River Complex is a microcosm of the many tidal tributaries in Chesapeake Bay — and of great importance to ensuring sustainable fisheries and coastal economies,” said Peyton Robertson, director of the NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office. “Working with partners at NOAA and around the area, we hope to successfully protect and restore the ecological health of this watershed and apply the habitat blueprint model to other coastal ecosystems throughout the region.”

Fisher said that if people focus on restoring reefs and setting aside larger areas for oyster reserves and sanctuaries, and also work on water quality, the Choptank will recover.

While he said that there will be cultural and economic consequences to such an effort, “If we want to restore the Choptank, this is what we have to do.” NOAA also identified the Penobscot River Watershed in Maine as a Habitat Focus Area.