

Eastern Branch of Elizabeth River Selection as 11th Tributary under the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement Oyster Outcome

Decision Summary for the Sustainable Fisheries Goal Implementation Team (GIT) Executive Committee

March 18, 2020

Background:

In 2014, the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement set out to “Continually increase finfish and shellfish habitat and water quality benefits from restored oyster populations” and “Restore native oyster habitat and populations in 10 tributaries by 2025 and ensure their protection.” All 10 tributaries have currently been selected toward the oyster outcome – Harris Creek, the Little Choptank River, Tred Avon, upper St. Mary’s and Manokin rivers in Maryland, and the Great Wicomico, Lafayette, Lower York, Lynnhaven and Piankatank rivers in Virginia.

The Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC) proposes that the Eastern Branch of the Elizabeth River (EBER) in Virginia be considered as the 11th tributary restored under the 2014 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement. Elizabeth River is a highly urbanized and historically impaired body of water in the Hampton Roads area and recovery is needed to support residents and businesses along with local, state and federal economies (City of Norfolk). Funding is available to complete restoration for the site. At the January 2020 GIT winter meeting, Andrew Button (VMRC) announced that \$1.5 million was awarded as part of a larger settlement for Superfund site restoration. The funding allows for full construction of 19.5 acres at the level of 100% Currently Restorable Oyster Habitat (CROH) (see *Restoration Target Setting* table).

The site was previously suggested as one of the five Virginia tributaries for restoration, with strong state and workgroup support from Hampton Roads and the Virginia Interagency Team. In-water reef construction is planned and will be completed by VMRC in late 2020. Support for restoration is also indicated by scientific surveys of bottom type (see *Bottom Type Summary*) and strong natural spatsets in the area. The methodology for setting restoration targets based on CROH is consistent with the previous 10 tributaries selected.

Elizabeth River Oyster Restoration Target Setting

Area Summary: Setting the "evidence based" restoration target of Currently Restorable Oyster Habitat (CROH).

<u>Bottom Type</u>	<u>Acres</u>
Muddy_Sand_Shell	0.6
Anthropogenic_Oyster_Reef	0.6
Biogenic_Oyster_Rubble	1.0
Gravel_Shell	3.2
Biogenic_Oyster_Rubble_Mud	14.1
Sum Acres (100% CROH)	19.5
50% CROH	9.8

CROH is the sum area of reasonably hard shelled bottom. Restoration targets are between 50%-100% of CROH.

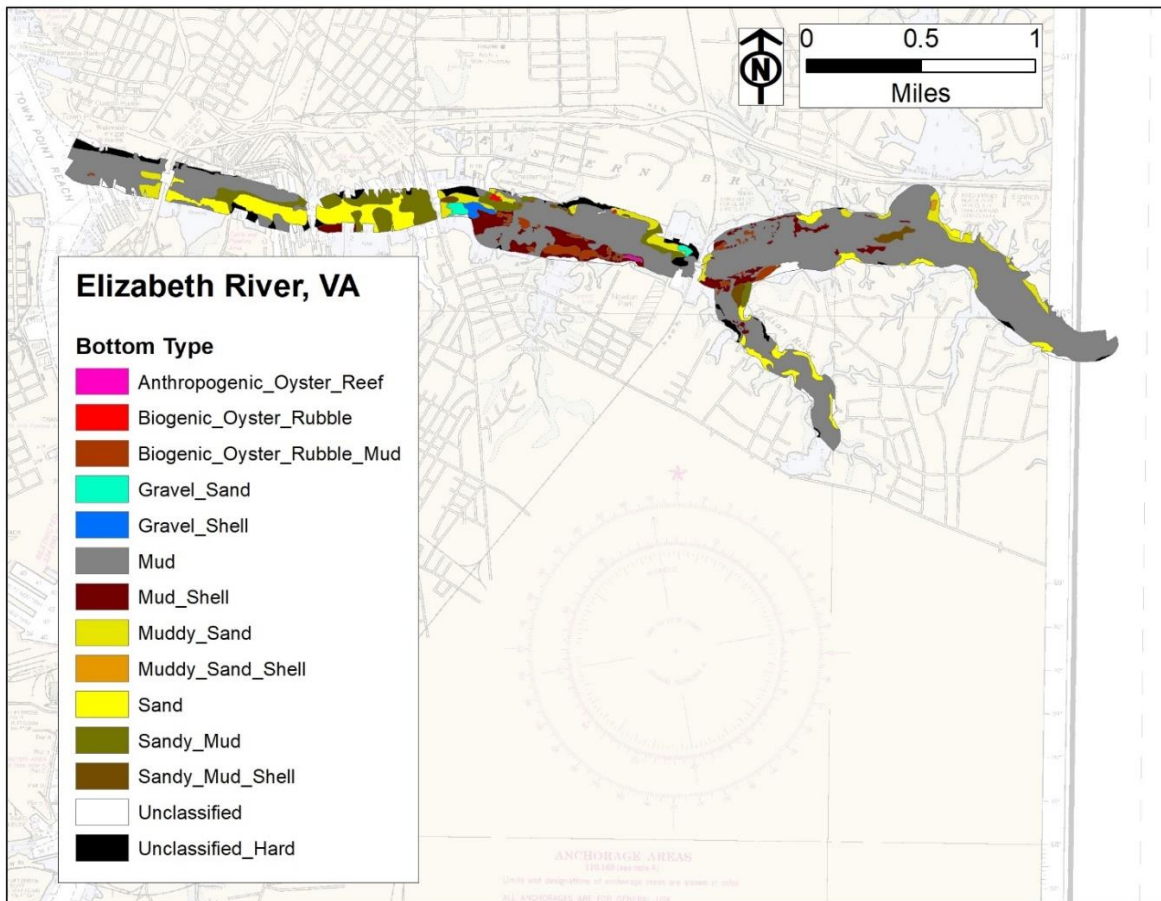
Selection Process:

Adding EBER as an additional tributary under the oyster outcome indicates that the selection process follows the same key steps, including developing a GIS geodatabase of spatial data, conducting surveys to characterize the river bottom and oyster population, defining 100% CROH and setting a restoration target (50% to 100% CROH). Because VMRC has plans in place for construction, a blueprint document is not needed. However, partners will complete a restoration certification document after construction is completed to certify that 100% of CROH has been restored. Post-construction monitoring is needed to ensure that reefs meet the oyster success metrics and demonstrate performance at the same standard as the other 10 tributaries.

Decision Framework:

The Sustainable Fisheries GIT Executive Committee will vote during the March 23, 2020 meeting to approve the EBER as a ‘bonus’ 11th tributary going beyond meeting the oyster outcome. This change is reflected in the oyster outcome Management Strategy and 2020-21 Logic and Action Plan, approved by Management Board on March 12, 2020, which includes the tributary restoration in the Chesapeake Bay Program 2-year adaptive management process. The Sustainable Fisheries GIT and workgroups remain fully committed to completing the 10 selected tributaries by 2025.

Bottom Type Summary



Seabed survey conducted in 2014 with sonar and with sediment grab ground truthing by the NOAA Chesapeake Bay office.