U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Back Bay Initiative: Goals and Objectives

David A. Stilwell
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
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David A. Stilwell
and
Linda S. George

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Virginia Field Office, P.O. Box 480
White Marsh, Virginia 23183

Back Bay has historically been noted for its abundant wildlife and fisheries. A testimony to this fact has been the establishment of two U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service National Wildlife Refuges (Back Bay and Mackey Island National Wildlife Refuges), three Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries Waterfowl Management Areas (Pocahontas, Barbours's Hill, and Trojan Waterfowl Management Areas) and a State park (False Cape State Park). Back Bay has been a major stopover point for waterfowl in the North Atlantic flyway, it had prodigious submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) beds and an outstanding fisheries. Since the 1920's these resources have fluctuated dramatically. Water quality in the bay is degraded, and at the present time, there is relatively little SAV in the bay, waterfowl use is drastically low, and fish populations are also generally depressed.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is a major land owner in the Back Bay watershed and is a steward for natural resources. Service concerns regarding the decline in the natural resources and water quality in the bay have culminated in a major new initiative to address water quality issues. The Back Bay Initiative is proposed as a multi-year initiative to address water quality issues in Back Bay, Virginia. The overall objectives are to: 1) review water quality, land use, and biological data pertaining to Back Bay and northern Currituck Sound for the purpose of evaluating historic and present day water quality trends, land use patterns, and ecosystem impacts; 2) establish and coordinate a communications network with Federal, State, and local government agencies and private conservation groups and citizens to encourage participation efforts to protect and enhance water quality in Back Bay; 3) establish and coordinate a scientific workgroup to evaluate water quality issues in Back Bay and subsequently determine what scientific data are necessary to support efforts to improve water quality; 4) conduct scientific studies to investigate the impacts from contaminants such as pesticides, herbicides, nutrients, and sediments to natural resources in the bay. In 1991, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is planning to conduct sediment bioassays to evaluate the pesticidal impacts on the bay by determining the relative toxicity of sediments in the bay. If the results from these assays prove the sediments are toxic, then the sediment will be analyzed to determine the potential causative agent(s). In 1992, the Service proposes to investigate nutrient discharges into the bay during storm events.

Participation from the various agencies can contribute to the overall effort to identify and resolve water quality problems in the watershed. The improvement of water quality on a watershed scale can only be successful through the commitment and coordination of resources of the many agencies that have the expertise, funding, and/or regulatory authority to affect changes.