



PRESS RELEASE

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Delaware Estuary Program's Science and Technical Advisory Committee Releases White Paper on American Shad and River Herring *Threats remain on depleted populations of migratory fish in the Delaware River Basin*

WILMINGTON — Today, the Delaware Estuary Program's Science and Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) released a new white paper entitled the Life History, Population Status, and Restoration of American Shad and River Herring in the Delaware River Basin. The primary role of the STAC is to offer objective, expert guidance and peer review on scientific and technical issues that support the goals of the Delaware Estuary Program and its partners. This includes advancing initiatives outlined in the Program's Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP).

The report encapsulates the most recent information on American shad and river herring in the Delaware River Basin. It is the product of a year's worth of collaboration among technical experts in the field of fish ecology that were convened as part of a STAC subcommittee. This report reviews six indices that reflect American shad and river herring population health, which are tracked by the Delaware River Basin Fish and Wildlife Management Cooperative.

"This report's comprehensive review highlights the extensive efforts by member states to determine population dynamics of American shad and river herring in the Basin while providing guidance on actions needed to better understand threats and paths to restoration. It highlights the complexities associated with management of migratory fish in the historic Delaware River Basin and provides a comprehensive resource to stakeholders for future research, said Gregory Lech, co-author, STAC chair, and fisheries biologist with the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission.

Sheila Eyler, lead author and biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said that populations of American shad and river herring, once abundant in the Delaware River and Estuary, are currently depleted and that with reduced populations, the critical ecosystem services they provide may likewise become threatened. The new White Paper seeks to fully assess the status of these fish in the Delaware River Basin while providing recommendations on how to best manage for the continuing health of their populations. "The fishery management agencies of the Delaware River Basin Fish and Wildlife Management Cooperative are tracking the

population trends through time and working with partners to manage and restore stocks,” Eyler said.

American shad, along with alewife and blueback herring (collectively termed “river herring”), are keystone fish species within the Delaware River Basin. All three species undertake seasonal migrations to spawn in Delaware River tributaries and provide numerous benefits to communities and habitats along the path of their journey.

“Historically, both indigenous people and early colonizers of the Delaware River Basin relied on the abundant American shad and river herring as vital food sources. However, their numbers have decreased to the point that we are looking to help preserve and restore these populations however we can,” said Ella Rothermel, co-author and urban resilience assistant manager at the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary. “Besides their cultural importance, American shad and river herring are also an important part of our local ecosystem as both predators and prey, helping with nutrient cycling, and acting as a host fish for our native freshwater mussel species.”

Overall, there is both good news and bad news to report on the status of these signature migratory fish species. On the positive side, water quality in the Delaware River Basin has improved and efforts to remove the dams that impede fish passage have gained momentum. Lance Butler, co-author and senior scientist with the Philadelphia Water Department, said that with these positive restoration trends, “each step toward renewal carries the promise of revitalized rivers, enriched biodiversity, and the reconnection of communities with a heritage once defined by these iconic fish.”

However, populations of American shad and river herring remain at historic lows and threats such as predation and changing water conditions will continue to affect these species moving forward. “Changing environmental conditions is a challenge that we all must face, now and in the future. Continuing to conduct meaningful research within the Delaware Estuary is the best way to understand and combat changes in the aquatic ecosystem,” said Ron Heun co-author and environmental compliance and program manager at PSEG. “PSEG recognizes these challenges and supports the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary and its goals to improve water quality and aquatic habitat restoration, as well as protecting and understanding our aquatic resources.” “This White Paper on American shad and river herring populations in the Delaware River Basin serves as a cornerstone to understanding the ecological dynamics of the watershed,” said LeeAnn Haaf, estuary science director at Partnership for the Delaware Estuary and advisor to the STAC. “It offers critical, species-specific insights that will help inform and strengthen the comprehensive assessment of the Estuary and Basin’s overall health.” That assessment, known as the Technical Report for the Estuary and Basin has been completed every five years since 2012 and is forthcoming in 2027.

The 2025 Life History, Population Status, and Restoration of American Shad and River Herring in the Delaware River Basin Report can be found on the PDE website at delawareestuary.org/blog/2025/09/23/stacpaper25

The 2019 CCMP for the Delaware Estuary can be found at delawareestuary.org/our-ccmp.

The 2022 Technical Report for the Estuary and Basin can be found at <https://delawareestuary.org/data-and-reports/treb>.

Additional questions can be directed to LeeAnn Haaf at lhaaf@delawareestuary.org or Ella Rothermel at erothermel@delawareestuary.org.

To learn more about The Partnership for the Delaware Estuary and the Delaware Estuary Program's Science Technical Advisory Committee, please visit delawareestuary.org/committees/science-and-technical-advisory-committee.

The Partnership for the Delaware Estuary, host of the Delaware Estuary Program, leads collaborative, science-based efforts to improve the Delaware River and Bay, which covers portions of Delaware, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

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