

NOAA Initiates New River Herring Status Review

ESA Determination May Affect In-Water Activities Along Eastern Coastal Rivers

By Chris Tomichek, Senior Fisheries Biologist

In an effort to determine whether the alewife and/or blueback herring, collectively known as the river herring, should be listed as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has announced a new status review. NOAA plans to evaluate the best available data on the status of the species, and is [soliciting new information](#) on river herring. This is an important opportunity for organizations to submit any data on these species collected since 2013.

The Importance and Ongoing Monitoring and Conservation of River Herring

The river herring (see *Figure 1*) has long served an important environmental role in supporting the ecology of freshwater, estuarine, and marine environments. They are a key food source for birds, other fish, seals, otters, and humans.

Due to overfishing, habitat impediments, and habitat degradation throughout coastal rivers of the East coast, the populations of river herring severely depleted from the 1950s to 1990s. In fact, by 2000, [estimates](#) put the river herring population at less than 5 percent of its historic peak. In recent decades, many states have implemented moratoria on the taking and possession of river herring.

In August 2011, the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) petitioned NOAA to have the river herring listed under the ESA. Further, in May 2012, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) completed a comprehensive assessment of 52 river herring stocks, discovering that 23 were depleted and only one was increasing relative to historic levels. Not enough data was available to assess the remaining stocks.

Despite these findings, in August 2013, NOAA [determined](#) that listing the river herring under the ESA was found to be not warranted at the time. Instead, river herring remained a Species of Concern, and NOAA committed to revisiting the species' status in 3 to 5 years.

NOAA also formed a technical working group, partnering with stakeholders to develop a conservation plan for river herring throughout its traditional range (see *Figure 2*).

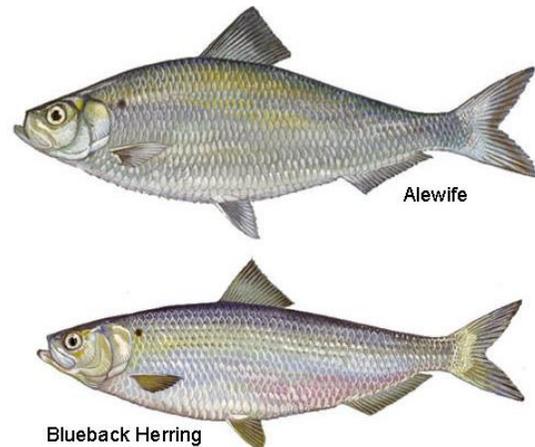


Figure 1. Images of the alewife and blueback herring, collectively known as the river herring (credit: NOAA)

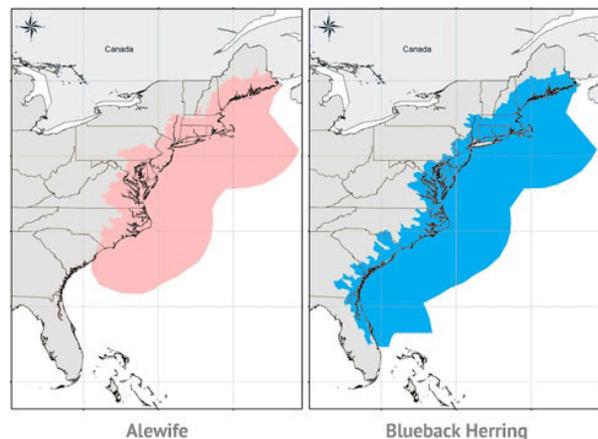


Figure 2. Traditional range of the alewife (left) and blueback herring (right) (credit: NOAA)

From 2013 to 2017, the time approximately equal to one generation of both species, various studies were completed, culminating in the ASMFC's 2017 river herring stock assessment update.

Completed in August, the ASMFC [assessment](#) found that even with numerous efforts to benefit river herring—including the installation of fish passageways and removal of waterway obstructions in several coastal rivers—the species still “remain depleted and at near historic lows on a coastwide basis.”

Initiation of the NOAA Status Review: Action Items and Potential Impacts

As previously noted, NOAA's recently initiated status review is revisiting whether river herring should be listed under the ESA. The 60-day period to solicit new information is a key part of this process, as NOAA is seeking additional data that has become available since their previous determination in 2013.

Those organizations that may be affected by an endangered or threatened designation are strongly encouraged to submit data regarding river herring populations along their respective waterways—especially data showing upward population trends.

Organizations that may be affected include hydropower and steam electric facilities, water utilities, construction entities, and other businesses with in-water activities.

This is because river herring are anadromous, meaning that they live in the ocean but move into freshwater streams to spawn.

For assistance developing and submitting new data, or for additional information regarding the river herring status review and its potential effects on your organization, contact Kleinschmidt Associates.

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However, the assessment did find pockets of improvement, particularly in some rivers throughout the Mid-Atlantic and New England regions. For instance, of the 54 river herring stocks that were assessed, the ASMFC found that:

- 16 had increasing population trends
- 2 had decreasing population trends
- 8 had stable population trends

The remaining stocks had either high variability or not enough available data.

Should the river herring be listed under the ESA, certain actions that are funded or authorized by Federal agencies will require ESA consultations to ensure minimal impact to habitat critical to the recovery of the river herring. A sampling of these actions includes:

- Hydropower
- Utility lines
- In-water construction
- Dredging
- Water removal
- Bridge, culvert, and road projects

To help avoid the complications of a listed status, including limited time frames for in-water work and permitting delays, organizations should submit data any new data by October 16 through the Federal eRulemaking [Portal](#).

Further, organizations should develop an understanding of the effects of how an ESA listing will impact their business.

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