SALT MARSH KEYSTONE INITIATIVE

BETWEEN LAND AND SEA

The mosaic of grassland, mud flats and channels where the ocean meets the land is called a tidal wetland or salt marsh. These areas — which extend along the Atlantic coast, from the rocky shores of Maine to the expansive tidal wetlands of Florida — flood and drain twice daily with the tides. A globally rare ecosystem, salt marsh is home to unique, native species that can live nowhere else; many birds, fish and other wildlife rely on salt marshes, including most commercial and recreational species that support a multi-billion-dollar industry. These marshes buffer coastal communities — and billions of dollars in infrastructure — from flooding due to major storms, which are intensifying due to climate change. Additionally, salt marshes store carbon at a rate 50 times greater than terrestrial forests, making them critical to lessening the effects of climate change.

These important ecosystems are disappearing due to development and climate change, and over the last decade the United States has led the world in rates of salt marsh loss.

To help bring back this ecosystem, as part of the Department of the Interior's Restoration and Resilience Framework funded by President Biden's Investing in America agenda, we launched the Salt Marsh Keystone Initiative. The initiative will work with partners to advance nature-based solutions that increase resilience, protect important natural carbon storage opportunities, conserve fish and wildlife habitat, and promote local economies.

Despite the significant losses in salt marsh habitat, there are bright spots: restored marshes are better equipped to adapt to sea-level rise and scientists have developed and honed successful techniques to restore these complex ecosystems from centuries of human impact. Restoring degraded marshes and protecting marsh-migration pathways in adjacent uplands are the two essential strategies to protecting our coastlines for humans and wildlife.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and partners have already effectively restored parts of the coastline, which has enabled vegetation to return and flourish, and increased community resiliency to flooding. Partners along the Atlantic Coast are collaborating to further restore and enhance salt marshes to protect the people, fish and wildlife that depend on them, and to protect migration pathways for marsh as sea levels continue to rise.

THE SALT MARSH KEYSTONE INITIATIVE:

Supports Atlantic Coastal Communities

More than 44 million Americans (13.6% of the U.S. population) live along the Atlantic Coast. Coastal flooding has become increasingly common, and storms are causing major damage to homes, roads and other infrastructure worth hundreds of billions of dollars. Nature-based solutions — adding back sediment to existing marshes, repairing water flow, and restoring or expanding oyster reefs to block ocean energy — provide social and economic benefits by creating jobs and sustaining businesses, while enhancing water quality and reducing coastal erosion and storm damage.

Protects Important Wildlife Habitat

Salt marshes are home to many species that people and businesses rely upon. Salt marshes are critical nurseries for healthy populations of commercially valuable fish, mollusks and crustaceans.

The saltmarsh sparrow, which spends its entire life cycle in salt marshes of the Eastern United States, has declined by more than 70% due to modification of salt marshes and sea-level rise. Many other declining bird species also rely on these areas for habitat including the threatened eastern black rail, at-risk American oystercatcher, and many species of waterfowl including the American black duck.

Fosters Key Partnerships

The Salt Marsh Keystone Initiative will foster partnerships across federal, Tribal, state and local governments, working alongside nonprofit and academic partners to understand, sustain and improve coastal habitats. Working across such a large area requires coordination, collaboration and communication at multiple levels. Together, these partnerships can move the needle towards a more resilient coastline.