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Press Release

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Overdevelopment Strikes at the Soul of N.C. Coast

Reporters, editors note: Media tours will be available starting at 2 p.m. Thursday, June 1 at the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum and Heritage Center on Harkers Island. There will be opportunities to get out on the water with crabbers, tour a soft-shell crabbing operation, visit development projects in Carteret County and talk with fish house owners. If interested call Frank Tursi or Christine Miller at NCCF at 252-393-8185

Ocean, NC – The N.C. coast is fast undergoing an unprecedented redevelopment that threatens to transform its water, its land and its people.

Fueled by investors speculating in a skyrocketing real-estate market, the land rush is on, the N.C. Coastal Federation notes in its annual *State of the Coast Report*. The family beach that generations of tourists visited each summer is fast disappearing. Condominiums are replacing fishing piers, and eight- and 10-bedroom rental machines are taking the place of modest beach bungalows.

On the mainland, where runaway development is moving along the state's sounds and up the coastal rivers and creek, the effects are even more profound, the Federation reports. There, in the small villages and rural counties, it is a struggle to preserve a way of life. It is the farmer in Brunswick County worried if his land in one of the fastest-growing counties in the country will soon become too pricey for soybeans. It is the crabber in Tyrrell County who must travel 30 miles to his crab pots each day because the high price of waterfront prevents him from finding a closer dock to tie up his boat. It is the oysterman in Onslow County who watches more shellfish grounds close each year because of pollution.

"The soul of who we are as a people is at stake," said Frank Tursi, the report's editor and lead author. "If the current pace of unplanned and largely uncontrolled growth continues, it's no secret what we will become. A visit to Florida, the Georgia Sea Islands or the South Carolina coast will give you a glimpse of our future."

It doesn't have to be that way. The *State of the Coast Report* features people and groups that are attempting to control their futures and save their heritage by better managing growth. It also details six strategies coastal communities and the state could employ to preserve the coast's traditional maritime culture and the water on which that heritage depends.

The report will be released Thursday, June 1, at the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum and Heritage Center on Harkers Island. The event starts at 10:30 a.m. and will feature a lunch of traditional coastal dishes prepared by museum volunteers and displays of traditional local crafts and skills. David Stick, the noted Outer Banks historian, will give the keynote address, and the winners of the Federation's 2005 Pelican Awards will be recognized.

Reports dealing with growth and development are invariably full of numbers, and this year's *State of the Coast Report* is no different: building permits are up as much as 300 percent in some coastal counties. The populations of Camden, Currituck, Brunswick and Dare counties increased 20 percent in five years. The coast's population is expected to increase another 40 percent by 2030 as baby boomers retire and continue the trend of moving close to the water. Farmland is declining. Urban areas are expanding.

But the *State of the Coast Report* is really about coastal people. It takes readers on a tour of the coast from Varnumtown in Brunswick County to South Mills in Camden County, stopping along the way at Harkers Island, Wanchese and Columbia. Farmers, like Ennis Swain of Varnumtown, tell of people they never heard of calling them to offer to buy their land for a condominium project. Shrimpers like Danny Galloway fear that the fish houses where they unloaded their catch will soon disappear because the waterfront land is worth more as a housing development. Natives of eastern Carteret County worry that they will have to sell land held by their families for generations just to pay the taxes.

"People tend to be fatalistic about growth and the money machine that feeds it," Tursi said. "Their attitude is that you can't do anything about it so why try? We found plenty of people who are doing something."

The residents of Wanchese in Dare County went door-to-door to fashion a zoning ordinance that preserves that old fishing village. People in eastern Carteret County rose up against the oncoming wave of uncontrolled growth and formed a grassroots organization that is now demanding a temporary building moratorium until better laws are in place. A public-private partnership that includes the Federation is trying to protect one of the last rural watersheds in Brunswick County.

State and local governments will probably have to step in if any remnant of the state's rich coastal heritage is to be saved. Some steps the Federation recommends in its report:

- ∞ Preserving a maritime culture means preserving the quality of the water on which that culture depends. The state must finally get serious about enforcing its environmental regulations. Regulatory agencies have been understaffed for far too long, and the fines assessed against polluters are too low to encourage compliance. Local governments must realize they, too, share responsibility for protecting the water, especially in controlling stormwater.
- ∞ The N.C. General Assembly should appoint a study commission to recommend ways the state can encourage varied waterfront uses, such as commercial fish houses, industrial and recreational marinas and recreational fishing piers.
- ∞ The General Assembly also should propose amending the state constitution to create new provisions that allow counties to provide relief from the high property taxes that encourage owners to sell their land to speculators or developers.
- ∞ Local governments should sponsor bond referendums that provide money to buy development rights or conservation easements to land that is ecologically or culturally significant or that provides waterfront access to commercial or recreational fishermen.

The *State of the Coast Report* can be downloaded from NCCF's website, www.nccoast.org on June 1.

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