

ASMFC Presents Willard Cole Prestigious Captain David H. Hart Award



St. Augustine, FL – The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission presented Willard “Bill” Cole, formerly with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Captain David H. Hart Award, its highest annual award, at the Commission’s 74th Annual Meeting in St. Augustine, FL.

Throughout his nearly 40-year career as a state, university, and federal fishery manager and scientist, Bill Cole worked to protect, restore, and conserve fisheries resources and their habitats along the Atlantic coast. Bill graduated from North Carolina State University in 1966, and moved to Lake City, Florida, where he began his career with the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission. Shortly after, he joined the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), where he stayed for the remainder of his career. At

USFWS, Bill served in different capacities and numerous offices from North Carolina, to New York, DC, Texas and even New Mexico. In each place he left an indelible mark; serving on review teams for the first Everglades study, developing the Navigable Waters Handbook; protecting riverine, wetland, and coastal habitats in Long Island Sound, the Hudson River and St. Lawrence Seaway; and establishing what ultimately would become the USFWS South Atlantic Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office. While with the South Atlantic Office, he worked closely with the State of North Carolina to restore anadromous fishery resources throughout the Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds, once the site of the largest commercial American shad and river herring fisheries on the entire East Coast.

With his customary vision, Bill understood early on that management of fishery resources in North Carolina required participation in regional fishery management institutions as well. As such, he became involved with both the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council and the Commission, as the Southeast Regional Director’s designee for both institutions. He served in that capacity continuously for 19 years. Bill served on numerous committees and management boards for both groups, and prior to his retirement served as Chair of the Commission’s South Atlantic State-Federal Fisheries Management Board.

Along with several colleagues, Bill conceived the Cooperative Winter Tagging Cruise off North Carolina and Virginia. The Cruise was designed to tag striped bass in a mixed stock of migratory fish wintering off the North Carolina Outer Banks and southern Virginia as a part of the Commission’s Atlantic migratory striped bass management program. The Cruise began in 1988 and has been conducted annually with few interruptions. It is one of the longest time series of any such coastal tagging program, as well as one of the most effective federal, state, and academic partnerships. Bill served as Chief Scientist on all but two of the cruises during an 18 year period, and annually coordinated

scheduling, equipment acquisition, and recruitment of all Scientific Party members. Through the years, tagging of additional ASMFC- and Council-managed species was added to the Cruise protocol. To date, the Cruise has tagged 252 Atlantic sturgeon and over 47,000 striped bass, with a tag return rate approaching 20 percent.

Bill is a charter member of the Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program Operations Committee, and has been an ardent supporter of the Program since its inception, providing staff to serve as the initial Program Coordinator, and working tirelessly with federal and state partners to move the program forward.

Finally, during his last year with USFWS, Bill was detailed to the National Marine Fisheries Service, where he served as Special Assistant to the Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, Dr. William Hogarth. Bill was a key element in the planning of several national-level meetings that brought together fisheries professionals from Regional Fishery Management Councils and Interstate Fisheries Management Commissions to consider the future directions of fisheries management.

Bill has characterized himself as a “biopolitician,” but his contribution to the management of U.S. East Coast fisheries goes well beyond his many notable accomplishments. Bill has been a true friend and mentor to many in our fisheries management family and we are deeply indebted to him. Since Bill was unable to attend the Hart Award ceremony, Dr. Wilson Laney, a longtime colleague and friend, accepted the award on Bill’s behalf.

The Commission instituted the Award in 1991 to recognize individuals who have made outstanding efforts to improve Atlantic coast marine fisheries. The Hart Award is named for one of the Commission’s longest serving members, who dedicated himself to the advancement and protection of marine fishery resources.