

North Carolina's Maritime Assets

Working Waterfronts, Waterways, and Supply Chain Competitiveness

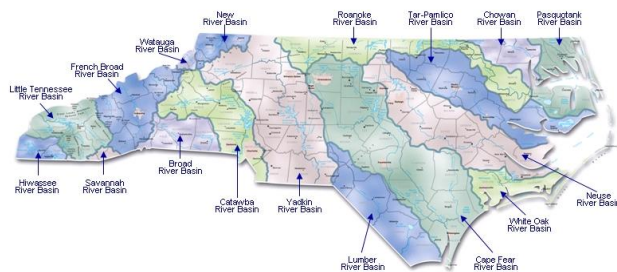
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Executive Summary

The mainstream conversation about North Carolina's maritime economy usually stops and starts with the ports of Wilmington and Morehead City. Rightfully so, as the ports' activity, together with the Charlotte Inland Port, supports more than 88,200 jobs and generates \$660 million in annual state and local tax revenue.¹ These two deepwater ports anchor any serious account of the state's maritime position. The state does however have a wider maritime asset base including inland waterways, ferry routes, working waterfronts, marine industrial sites, boatbuilding and repair firms, public fleet maintenance facilities, seafood and shellfish businesses, defense and dual-use suppliers, coastal research institutions, and water-adjacent freight and project-cargo assets.

Our deepwater ports are growing, and that momentum creates room for development across the rest of the maritime ecosystem. Boatbuilders, marine trades firms, seafood dealers, shellfish growers, ferry operators, port users, defense-adjacent suppliers, university researchers, and coastal communities rely on them in different ways. The opportunity is wider than finding new uses for idle infrastructure. We can also ask how existing maritime businesses and public systems would grow if working water access, industrial waterfront sites, maintained channels, skilled labor, vessel maintenance capacity, cold chain, distribution, hatchery capacity, and storm readiness were addressed together.

A supply chain view helps separate useful opportunity from waterfront enthusiasm. Water access can help a company move heavy cargo, launch and repair vessels, handle food and freight, preserve transportation access where the highway network crosses water, stage energy equipment, supply a defense customer, support a public fleet, or test coastal technologies. The same water access can sit unused when cargo, customers, workforce, depth, equipment, permits, and capital are missing. North Carolina should judge maritime assets by the operating problems they solve and the business decisions they can change.



Beyond the Cape Fear and White Oak watersheds, the state's wider maritime base reaches into northeastern North Carolina, the Albemarle and Pamlico sounds, ferry terminals, Wanchese, Perquimans, Riverbulk, maintenance yards, aquaculture corridors, mariculture leases, and research institutions. It also reaches inland to boat manufacturers and marine suppliers whose products and

workforce are tied to the water without being on the waterfront.

Some of these assets are operating today and serving real businesses. Some are early local bets still seeking tenants, capital and demand. Some need stronger data or a shift in federal conditions before a sustainable business case can be made. A more comprehensive maritime conversation would help North Carolina see where water-linked infrastructure can support real industries, where public assets need maintenance and workforce support, and where the state has room to compete on its own terms.

¹ North Carolina Ports, "Economic Contribution," accessed June 18, 2026, <https://ncports.com/about-the-ports/economic-development/>.

1. Maritime as a Supply Chain Question

Assumptions about maritime assets get stale quickly. Ports are treated as heavy industry. Ferries are a transportation budget item. Coastal waterways are treated as environmental, recreational, or navigation issues. Working waterfronts become local concerns. Marine industrial sites become county economic development projects. Boatbuilding is often seen as a niche craft economy, while seafood is filed under coastal heritage. Each category has its own owners, funding sources, cultures, vocabulary, and metrics for success.

Businesses don't silo their decisions this way. A company evaluating a coastal industrial location thinks about water access, road and rail connections, utility capacity, workforce, insurance and storm risk, permitting requirements, and freight options all at the same time. A shipper considering barge movement compares vessel costs with truck or rail service, then adds terminal handling, drayage, inventory, channel depth, reliability, and their customer's tolerance for schedule delay. A boatbuilder needs protected water, launch access, lifts, suppliers, electric service, paint and composites capacity, and skilled labor. A seafood company needs docks, ice, refrigeration, processing space, trucks, buyers, water quality, and reliable access after storms.

North Carolina's maritime assets create real value where they solve real business, infrastructure, or continuity problems. A protected basin can make a repair or fabrication business possible. A ferry route can preserve access for workers, visitors, supplies, and emergency services where geography limits alternatives. A barge terminal can move heavy or awkward cargo that would otherwise consume road capacity or require costly special handling. A working waterfront can keep seafood moving from catch to market. A research institution can help communities and firms innovate and develop new industry.

Nearby states offer useful perspective, but North Carolina should not simply copy-paste. Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia operate larger port systems and inland connections, with capital commitments and industrial development patterns that give water access statewide economic reach.² North Carolina's likely lane is different. Bulk and breakbulk cargo, project cargo, rural maritime industrial sites, ferries, marine trades, defense suppliers, seafood, mariculture, and coastal research capacity create a practical set of opportunities that do not require the state to chase the container scale of Norfolk, Charleston, or Savannah.

2. North Carolina's Maritime Asset Base Already in Use

North Carolina's maritime base begins with geography. The Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway is a protected inland route connecting Norfolk to Florida.³ Paired with navigable waterways north of the Elizabeth River through the Cape Cod Canal, its reach nears Boston. Two northern connections, the Dismal Swamp Canal and the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal, link northeastern North Carolina's waterways to Chesapeake Bay and Hampton Roads.⁴ These physical connections do not create cargo on their own, but they give the Albemarle region a water link to a significant percentage of the US population and industrial concentration.

² K. Scott Swan, *The Fiscal Year 2021 National Economic Impacts of the Port of Virginia*, prepared for the Virginia Port Authority (Williamsburg, VA: Raymond A. Mason School of Business, College of William & Mary, August 18, 2022); Joseph C. Von Nessen, *Economic Impact of South Carolina Ports: 2023 Statewide and Regional Analysis* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Darla Moore School of Business, October 2023); Jeffrey M. Humphreys, *Economic Impact of Georgia's Deepwater Ports: FY 2024* (Athens: University of Georgia Terry College of Business, 2024).

³ Encyclopedia Britannica, s.v. "Intracoastal Waterway," <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Intracoastal-Waterway>.

⁴ U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Norfolk District, *The Dismal Swamp Canal and the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal*, 2011, https://www.nao.usace.army.mil/Portals/31/docs/civilworks/AIWW_Brochure_2011.pdf.

M-95 gives that geography a federal transportation designation. The United States Maritime Administration (MARAD) identifies M-95 as the Atlantic Ocean Coastal Waters marine highway route, part of a national marine highway system intended to support waterborne movement where it supplements landside transportation. The name places it beside the I-95 corridor in the public imagination, but it functions differently. The United States Marine Highway Program can support projects on designated routes, but MARAD is not an operating administration. The program creates a funding and planning lens for water movement, while local partners must still prove cargo, terminals, vessels, schedules, and public benefits.⁵

Beyond the ports, the same asset base includes Riverbulk Terminal on the Chowan River, Wanchese Marine Industrial Park, Perquimans Marine Industrial Park, the NCDOT ferry system, Manns Harbor maintenance operations and numerous others. These economic assets do not form a tidy system. Real economic value only materializes when an asset helps a firm or agency do something it could not do as well landside. Different industries also need different forms of water access. Ferries need service continuity. Marine trades need protected water. Seafood and shellfish need clean water, working waterfront access, processing, cold chain, and markets. Project cargo, defense, and energy all have their own needs which may seem disparate, but in operation, overlap.

3. Marine Highways, Riverbulk, and Freight That Fits Water

The most concrete example of what M-95 can mean in North Carolina is Riverbulk Terminal, located on the Chowan River near Edenton. Riverbulk Transportation began as the Edenton River Barge Company in 1999 and partnered with Stevens Towing in 2005.⁶ The company expanded purchasing the former United Piece Dye Works industrial site in 2016. Riverbulk has since developed into an operating heavy-industry terminal with 50 acres in a Federal Opportunity Zone, 12 feet of water depth, 350 feet of bulkhead, a 1,000-foot pier capable of fleeting up to 15 barges, a crane pad rated at 500 tons, 100,000 square feet of warehouse space, 200,000 square feet of shovel-ready land, and connections to three-phase power and natural gas.⁷

MARAD designated the Riverbulk Steel Shuttle as a Marine Highway Project in 2022, connecting the site to a route through the Chowan River, Albemarle Sound, the Intracoastal Waterway, Chesapeake Bay, the C&D Canal, and the Delaware River to ports including Norfolk, Baltimore, Wilmington, Philadelphia, and New Jersey.⁸ That designation did not create a service by itself. It instead validated Riverbulk as part of a larger East Coast waterborne freight network where water access, industrial land, warehousing, staging, heavy lift, and regional routes can support freight that fits the economics of barge movement. Adding to the state's site inventory where industrial land, and regional water routes are physically joined, productively.

Riverbulk's value is easier to understand through actual movements than through designation alone. Simon Rich III, president and general manager of Riverbulk Transportation, said the company unloads ships at the Port of Morehead City directly into barges and then moves those barges roughly 150 miles inland to Nucor Steel's Hertford County mill. The company also regularly

⁵ U.S. Maritime Administration, "Marine Highway Route M-95, Atlantic Ocean Coastal Waters," accessed June 9, 2026, <https://www.maritime.dot.gov/grants-finances/marine-highways/marine-highway-route-m-95-atlantic-ocean-coastal-waters>.

⁶ Edenton Chowan Partnership, "Edenton Chowan Partnership Riverbulk Terminal, Nucor, United Piece Dye Works," provided materials, n.d.

⁷ Stevens Towing, Riverbulk Terminal Flyer, https://www.stevens-towing.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/RiverbulkTerminal_Flyer_sm.pdf; and Stevens Towing, "Riverbulk Terminal, Edenton NC," <https://www.stevens-towing.com/riverbulk-terminal-edenton-nc/>.

⁸ U.S. Department of Transportation, "MARAD Announces Four New Marine Highway Project Designations," June 7, 2022, <https://www.transportation.gov/briefing-room/marad-announces-four-new-marine-highway-project-designations-projects-will-be>.

calls private and public ports in Norfolk, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New Jersey, picking up recycled scrap metal and delivering it to the same mill. In that sense, a major industrial customer can function with its own inland port, using water access to connect an inland manufacturing site with coastal and East Coast port networks. Here this economic benefit bolsters the Port of Morehead City's competitiveness versus bleeding that transportation value-add to the Hampton Roads, Virginia area.

The cargoes that fit this kind of asset are usually heavy, dense, oversized, awkward, industrial, schedule-tolerant, or port-connected. Steel, equipment, bulk materials, wind components, transformers, construction materials, and agricultural or industrial inputs are more plausible than freight that needs tight delivery windows or frequent sorting. Barge movement can reduce road burden and help with difficult cargo, but the business case changes by lane and often commodity. Terminal handling, drayage, storage, inventory cost, water depth, and service reliability can erase a cheap line-haul rate if they are not designed into the movement from the beginning.



"Inland barge terminals allow eastern North Carolina to attract heavy industry that needs a solid workforce and a direct connection to East Coast ocean and inland ports to locate here, for shipment to almost anywhere," said Simon Rich III, President/GM of Riverbulk Transportation. Photo (c) Riverbulk Transportation.

Rich also pointed to a wider geography than one terminal or one customer. Many coastal areas in North Carolina can be connected directly to state ports if they have a reliable 12-foot-deep connection to the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway system. Riverbulk regularly moves large, heavy, bulky, and oversized cargo between Florida and New Jersey, including points between them, through an inland waterway system that connects rivers, sounds, and bays along the East Coast. That network does not make every water-adjacent site a freight asset, but it gives water-linked industrial sites a real transportation option when cargo, depth, handling, roads, customers, and timing line up.

Defense and advanced manufacturing provide another possible use case. Large defense platforms are often built through modular construction, with major sections fabricated away from the final shipyard and moved into place when needed. Some "modules" are too large or heavy to

move efficiently by truck or rail, which can make barge access valuable. Inland terminals such as Riverbulk could give North Carolina a way to participate in portions of the defense maritime supply chain through fabrication, staging, movement, storage, or specialized handling.

For North Carolina industry, the Riverbulk example should prompt a more concrete freight conversation. The state can identify specific cargoes, customers, and routes where barge movement could solve a problem. That is the right discipline for M-95. A federal route and project designation can open doors and facilitate funding, while the useful work remains lane-level analysis with operators, shippers, terminals, and public agencies all at the table.

4. Rural Maritime Industrial Sites, Boatbuilding, and Marine Trades

Wanchese Marine Industrial Park shows why marine industrial parks should be treated differently from ordinary industrial parks. Its defining asset is the 15-acre man-made basin, which gives tenants water access and dockage throughout the site rather than relying on a single shared access point. Bob Peele, the park's director, described the basin, access, and dockage as the infrastructure that makes the rest of the park work. Roads, power, utilities, and buildings are still necessary, but the marine business case begins with getting vessels, products, workers, and equipment to and from the water.

This dynamic is especially relevant in northeastern North Carolina, where several counties carry Tier 1 or Tier 2 economic distress designations and conventional industrial recruitment can be more difficult. Interstate access, large modern buildings, utility redundancy, and dense labor markets are limited. Water access is one of the region's differentiators, but it becomes an advantage only when it is converted into usable industrial infrastructure.⁹

Wanchese Marine Industrial Park, operated by the NC Marine Industrial Park Authority on Roanoke Island in Dare County, opened in 1981 with a purpose-built basin, 50 acres of industrial land, and dedicated water and wastewater systems.¹⁰ At capacity, its industrial lots sustain welding and machine shops, marine engine sales and repair, cabinetry, upholstery, and boat detailing businesses.¹¹ The NC Marine Industrial Park Authority leases parcels rather than selling them, which keeps land under public control, provides a continuing revenue stream for maintenance and operations, and allows the Authority to manage the mix of uses inside the park. That tenant mix is part of the value proposition.

Wanchese is built around small and mid-sized marine businesses rather than a single large prime, and the concentration of boatbuilding, repair, seafood, commercial fishing, and supply services allows companies to feed work to each other. Peele described Wanchese as a "one-stop shop," where the basin, dockage, and small-business orientation allow marine firms to feed work to one another. The park's largest employer has 99 employees, while several businesses have only one or two, giving the facility a local, specialized character that would be difficult to reproduce through

⁹ North Carolina Department of Commerce, "Commerce Issues 2026 Economic Development Tier Rankings," November 26, 2025, <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2025/11/26/commerce-issues-2026-economic-development-tier-rankings>; North Carolina Department of Commerce, "County Distress Rankings/Tiers," accessed June 9, 2026, <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/grants-incentives/county-distress-rankings-tiers>.

* Image: *Stevens Towing Company intracoastal barge sailing on the Chowan River near Edenton, NC; Photo (c) Stevens Towing Co.*

¹⁰ Business Facilities, "The Marine Industry in North Carolina: Smooth Sailing Ahead," <https://businessfacilities.com/the-marine-industry-in-north-carolina-smooth-sailing-ahead/>.

¹¹ Business Facilities, "The Marine Industry in North Carolina: Smooth Sailing Ahead," <https://businessfacilities.com/the-marine-industry-in-north-carolina-smooth-sailing-ahead/>.

standard industrial recruitment. The site has served more than four decades of sustained private-sector demand from marine industries on the Outer Banks.

A deeper look at the tenant list gives the Wanchese story more credibility than a general claim about waterfront potential. It includes boatbuilders and marine service firms such as Bayliss Boatworks, Island Boatworks, Daniels Boatworks, Forbes Boatworks, Blackwell Boatworks, Croswait Custom Composites, Griffin Marine, Wanchese Trawl and Supply, and O’Neal’s Sea Harvest, along with a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers survey team.¹² That is a working cluster, not



*Wanchese Marine Industrial Park in Dare County, NC
Photo (c) NCMIPA*

a generic waterfront parcel. It shows why basin access, docks, ramps, utilities, tenant space, and management shape the ability of marine businesses to operate. Demand for this space has spurred the Authority to look to the future. According to Peele, all parcels in Wanchese have been fully leased since 2005, and companies rarely gave up lots even during the recession. In June 2026, the NC Marine Industrial Park Authority voted to begin searching for additional sites because of potential growth

in the marine business sector.

Perquimans Marine Industrial Park is a newer county-led effort to build some of those conditions. It is currently Perquimans County’s primary economic development initiative, anchored by a 350-foot-wide inland basin for marine-related businesses that need protected and bulkheaded waterfront access, with a 42-foot-wide industrial boat ramp for launching large watercraft.¹³ The first phase of development was completed in 2024 with an investment of \$7 million for basin construction, bulkheaded shoreline, road access, and utilities, on a site 65 miles from the Hampton Roads maritime supply chain.¹⁴ The site has the kind of physical infrastructure that marine businesses may need, while tenant demand, workforce, operating costs, and private capital still have to develop around it. The Perquimans site should be treated as a capital investment in readiness.

Boatbuilding and marine trades belong in this analysis because they show the maritime asset base is already being used by real firms. The National Marine Manufacturers Association (NMMA) estimates that recreational boating has a \$9.1 billion annual economic impact in North Carolina, supports more than 28,000 jobs and 1,081 businesses, with more than 345,000 registered boats and \$1.3 billion in annual new boat, engine, trailer, and accessory sales. In North Carolina’s 1st

¹² North Carolina Marine Industrial Park Authority. Wanchese Marine Industrial Park: Tenant Contact Names and Addresses. Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Commerce, n.d. <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/north-carolina-marine-industrial-park-tenants-list/download?attachment>.

¹³ Perquimans County Economic Development, “The Perquimans County NC Marine Park,” accessed June 11, 2026, <https://perquimansecon.com/perquimans-marine-park>.

¹⁴ Lisa Zaslow-Segelman, “The Marine Industry in North Carolina: Smooth Sailing Ahead,” *Business Facilities*, April 9, 2025, <https://businessfacilities.com/the-marine-industry-in-north-carolina-smooth-sailing-ahead/>. *Business Facilities* is a trade publication; the first-phase figure should be confirmed against a primary source where possible.

Congressional District alone, NMMA estimates an annual economic impact of \$841.6 million, supporting 2,267 jobs and 80 businesses.¹⁵ Those figures include more than boatbuilding, but that is part of the point. The recreational boating economy reaches manufacturers, suppliers, dealers, service firms, marinas, storage, fuel, repair, parts, accessories, and customer activity across the coast, lakes, and rivers.



Boatbuilding at Grady-White Boats in Greenville, NC
Photo (c) Grady-White Boats

North Carolina's boat manufacturing base includes both waterfront and inland firms. On-water or near-water manufacturers include Jarrett Bay, Parker Marine Enterprises, Bayliss Boatworks, Bennett Brothers Yachts, Iconic Marine Group in Chocowinity, Regulator Marine in Edenton, and White River Marine Group's Hatteras, MAKO, and Ranger Saltwater operations in New Bern, along with smaller builders such as Winter Custom Yachts, Edenton Boatworks, Cape Fear Boat Works, Mann Custom Boats, and Shearline Boatworks. Wanchese Marine Industrial Park adds another cluster of boatbuilders and support firms to the inventory.

Marine manufacturers also bring the maritime economy inland. Grady-White Boats in Greenville and World Cat in Tarboro are not waterfront boatyards, but are still an active part of North Carolina's maritime industrial base. Founded in 1959, Grady-White has built a national reputation from inland eastern North Carolina around premium boat manufacturing, skilled craftsmanship, customer satisfaction, and proprietary design. In 2025, Grady-White purchased more than \$30 million in goods and services from North Carolina companies, including suppliers such as A & J Canvas in Vanceboro, MDC Holdings in Greenville, Florida Marine Tanks in Henderson, Moore's Fiberglass in Walstonburg, Winterville Machine Works in Winterville, and Fin-Addict in Benson.¹⁶ World Cat began building offshore power catamarans in Greenville in 1998 before transitioning to its Tarboro facility in 2002.¹⁷ The company was recently awarded top prize in the NC Chamber's 2025 "Coolest Thing Made in NC" competition.¹⁸ Together with firms such as Brunson Marine in Wilson, makers of Bay Rider Boats, these manufacturers show that maritime competitiveness includes inland firms whose products, suppliers, workforce, dealers, service networks, and customers are tied to the water. This is a dynamic, productive, and statewide ecosystem.

¹⁵ National Marine Manufacturers Association, *Recreational Boating: Impact in North Carolina* (Washington, DC: National Marine Manufacturers Association, n.d.), citing NMMA 2023 Economic Impact Study and NMMA 2024 Recreational Boating Statistical Abstract.

¹⁶ Shelley Tubaugh, Vice President-Marketing, Grady-White Boats, email message to author, July 7, 2026

¹⁷ TowneBank. "World Cat: Built in North Carolina for Boaters Around the World." *TowneToday*, Winter 2026.

¹⁸ World Cat, "World Cat: Offshore Power Catamarans," accessed June 18, 2026, <https://worldcat.com/>. Please note: the "Coolest Thing Made in NC" competition is run by the North Carolina Chamber, with which the NC Chamber Foundation is affiliated.

Dealers and service networks are another important part of the marine economy. Most mid-size and larger boat manufacturers rely on dealerships to sell and service the boats they produce. Those dealerships support jobs, buy goods and services, and connect customers to fuel, oil, fishing tackle, safety equipment, boating apparel, maintenance, repair, storage, and launch access. This activity is not limited to the coast. It reaches lakes, rivers, inland communities, and the places where boat owners live and buy what they need to use their boats. Marinas, boat storage facilities, full-service yards, marine repair shops, boat dealers, trailer manufacturers, parts suppliers, and service companies create the practical infrastructure that keeps boats in use and keeps waterfront assets economically productive.



*Grady-White Boats factory floor in Greenville, NC.
Photo (c) Grady-White Boats*

The workforce overlap in these maritime sectors is also broad. Welding, machining, engines, electrical systems, composites, coatings, cabinetry, upholstery, dock work, repair, and vessel maintenance show up across private boatyards, ferry maintenance, public fleets, defense suppliers, marine construction, and project cargo support. A region that treats those skills as a shared labor base will have a better chance of supporting firms that serve more than one customer market.

5. Seafood, Working Waterfronts, and Shellfish Mariculture

Commercial fishing, seafood handling, and shellfish mariculture keep the maritime discussion grounded in existing industry. North Carolina has a formal trip-ticket reporting system for commercial landings. The Division of Marine Fisheries says mandatory trip-level dealer reporting began in 1994 and captures details such as fisherman, dealer, date, crew, area, gear, species, and landed quantities. The broader Fisheries Statistics portal houses landings queries, annual reports, bulletins, fish dealer reports, and socioeconomic reports.¹⁹

Seafood processing and handling are harder to capture in one clean public dataset. The best source base is split across regulatory and economic systems. NC DEQ's shellfish sanitation program says it typically permits 180 to 200 interstate and intrastate shellfish processors annually, inspects those processors at least quarterly, and has about 20 certified crustacean processors in the state.²⁰ NOAA Fisheries' economics data separately tracks seafood sales and processing as part of the marine economy.²¹ Those sources do not create a perfect processor inventory, but they establish that seafood handling is a regulated and measurable part of the maritime economy.

¹⁹ North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries, "Trip Ticket Program," accessed June 14, 2026, <https://www.deq.nc.gov/about/divisions/marine-fisheries/science-and-statistics/trip-ticket-program>; North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries, "Fisheries Statistics," accessed June 17, 2026, <https://www.deq.nc.gov/about/divisions/marine-fisheries/science-and-statistics/fisheries-statistics>.

²⁰ North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries, Shellfish Sanitation and Recreational Water Quality Section, "Inspections," accessed June 17, 2026, <https://www.deq.nc.gov/about/divisions/marine-fisheries/shellfish-sanitation-and-recreational-water-quality/inspections>; U.S. Food and Drug Administration, "Interstate Certified Shellfish Shippers List," accessed June 16, 2026, <https://www.fda.gov/food/federal-state-local-tribal-and-territorial-cooperative-human-food-programs/interstate-certified-shellfish-shippers-list>.

²¹ NOAA Fisheries, "Fisheries Economics of the United States: Data and Visualizations," accessed June 17, 2026, <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/data-tools/fisheries-economics-united-states-data-and-visualizations>.

The infrastructure needs are easy to understand even when the data is fragmented. Fish and shellfish move through docks, fish houses, ice, cold storage, processing rooms, trucks, restaurants, wholesalers, and inland distributors. Those businesses also depend on boat repair, working waterfront access, dredged channels, water quality, storm recovery, and reliable roads.



Oyster cages cleaned at Chadwick Creek Oysters in Pamlico County.
Photo (c) Andrea Bruce/[Down in the County](#).

Like productive farmland, working waterfront is far easier to lose than to rebuild. Once it becomes housing or hospitality, that capacity rarely comes back to industry.

Shellfish mariculture deserves specific treatment as an emerging sector, not nascent but not fully mature. The Division of Marine Fisheries' 2022 shellfish growers analysis reported that North Carolina oyster pounds harvested from private bottom leases increased more than tenfold from 2013 to 2022. The same analysis reported 855,845 pounds harvested from private leases in 2022,

with an ex-vessel value of \$4.1 million, estimated support for 529 jobs, and \$15.5 million in added value impacts.²² This sector further proves that maritime assets are not only valuable when they serve heavy cargo or defense manufacturing. They also serve perishable products, small firms, family businesses, restaurants, tourism, and local supply chains.

The growth question is not limited to lease acreage or farm production. Aquaculture also needs a supply chain around it. A 2025 RTI policy brief compared North Carolina with Virginia and found that the Commonwealth's larger aquaculture sector is supported by a more mature chain of hatcheries, producers, processors, wholesalers, distributors, retailers, and customers.²³ North Carolina has many of the same natural advantages, but growers often face thinner local networks. It's true that shellfish and aquaculture growth depend on water quality and leases, but also on the businesses and infrastructure that move product from farm to market.

Chris Matteo of the NC Shellfish Growers' Association described that supply chain in practical terms. Growers need access, clean water, gear, boats, cold storage, labor, insurance, storm recovery, permitting, market development, and other than perhaps hatchery capacity or local broodstock, these are needs familiar across the entire maritime economy. Matteo also believes there is room for improvement in mariculture suited to a North Carolina solution. "There is a lot of low-hanging fruit for process, mechanization, and gear improvements, and NC has the engineering talent to advance the industry."

Market reach is a big part of the equation. "Most NC shellfish farmers are selling within a state or two away, at most," said Matteo. "We need much better cold chain and distribution to go further." Growth for the sector depends on the same refrigerated infrastructure that the wild catch and food

²² North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries, *Social and Economic Analysis of Commercial Fisheries in North Carolina: Shellfish Growers 2022*, accessed June 17, 2026, <https://www.deq.nc.gov/marine-fisheries/social-and-economic-analysis-commercial-fisheries-north-carolina-shellfish-growers-2022/open>.

²³ Jess Wilkinson, Adams Bailey, and Sara Lawrence, *Jumpstarting North Carolina's Blue Economy: Opportunities in Ecosystem Technologies*, RTI Press Publication No. PB-0031-2509 (Durham: RTI Press, September 2025), <https://doi.org/10.3768/rtipress.2025.pb.0031.2509>



Wholesale Food Distributor Atlantic Seafood serves six states and the District of Columbia from their homebase in Hamstead, NC.
Photo (c) Atlantic Seafood

economy rely on, and that capacity is expanding in southeastern North Carolina, driven mainly by agriculture and life sciences. The momentum starts with the Port of Wilmington Cold Storage, the first on-port cold storage facility in North Carolina, developed through a public-private partnership between NC Ports and a Wilmington-based developer.²⁴ Since then, the region has added substantial additional capacity. NC Ports reports that more than one million square feet of cold storage has been added in recent years,²⁵ including Cold Summit Development's roughly 300,000-square-foot facility near the port, the Pender County facility owned by RL Cold and operated by Performance Team, a Maersk-owned logistics company, and

Lewis Nursery and Farms' cold-treatment and storage facility.²⁶ Seafood and shellfish may not be the primary driver of those investments, but they benefit from the same refrigerated infrastructure that supports the broader perishable goods economy.²⁷ Growth in the maritime economy around the ports, including seafood, agriculture, life sciences, cold storage, and refrigerated logistics, helps build the cargo base, customer demand, and regional service network behind NC Ports' strategic goal of becoming the Cold Gateway of the Mid-Atlantic.²⁸

6. Ferries, Manns Harbor, and Public Marine Infrastructure

The NCDOT Ferry Division is part of North Carolina's highway transportation system where that system crosses navigable water. It operates on the water, but its public-purpose is transportation continuity, connecting ferry-dependent communities, carrying residents and visitors, and preserving access where geography limits roads. NCDOT manages the second-largest state-run ferry system in the United States, carrying about 800,000 vehicles and 1.8 million passengers annually on more than 20 ferries across seven regular routes. NCDOT also identifies the ferry system's emergency role, including Stumpy Point to Rodanthe service when N.C. 12 is damaged.²⁹

For ferry-dependent communities, the service affects more than visitor movement. Supplies, contractors, workers, school travel, medical access, service calls, emergency response, and tourism businesses all depend on routes that can keep operating. A ferry route is not a freight

²⁴ Still, Johanna F. "The Frost Market Heats Up." *WilmingtonBiz*, July 7, 2022.

https://www.wilmingtonbiz.com/wilmingtonbiz_magazine/2022/07/07/the_frost_market_heats_up/23345

²⁵ Dill, Emma. "Cold Chain Summit Highlights Port Goals, Tech Potential." *WilmingtonBiz*, April 17, 2026.

https://www.wilmingtonbiz.com/maritime/2026/04/17/cold_chain_summit_highlights_port_goals_tech_potential/27416

²⁶ Still, Johanna F. "Maersk To Operate Pender Commerce Park Cold Storage Facility." *WilmingtonBiz*, December 15, 2022.

[https://www.wilmingtonbiz.com/real_estate_-](https://www.wilmingtonbiz.com/real_estate_-commercial/2022/12/15/maersk_to_operate_pender_commerce_park_cold_storage_facility/23983)

[commercial/2022/12/15/maersk_to_operate_pender_commerce_park_cold_storage_facility/23983](https://www.wilmingtonbiz.com/real_estate_-commercial/2022/12/15/maersk_to_operate_pender_commerce_park_cold_storage_facility/23983)

²⁷ WilmingtonBiz, "The Frost Market Heats Up," July 2022,

https://www.wilmingtonbiz.com/wilmingtonbiz_magazine/2022/07/07/the_frost_market_heats_up/23345

²⁸ Emma Dill, "Cold Chain Summit Highlights Port Goals, Tech Potential," *WilmingtonBiz*, April 17, 2026,

https://www.wilmingtonbiz.com/maritime/2026/04/17/cold_chain_summit_highlights_port_goals_tech_potential/27416

²⁹ North Carolina Department of Transportation, "About Ferry Division," accessed June 13, 2026,

<https://www.ncdot.gov/divisions/ferry/Pages/about.aspx>.

corridor in the traditional sense, but groceries, construction materials, fuel service, tradespeople, and small-business inputs often move through the same system that carries residents and visitors.

A 2019 NCDOT research study on freight planning for the ferry system found freight moving on all seven routes. Researchers cataloged building supplies, waste services, produce, and fuel moving by ferry, and survey respondents identified construction materials, food and beverage supplies, and retail goods as frequent categories.³⁰ In coastal communities where road alternatives are limited by geography or damage, the ferry is what keeps people and freight moving.



NC Ferry Division's facility at Manns Harbor, NC. Photo (c) NCDOT Ferry Division

The NC Ferry Division's facility at Manns Harbor adds another layer to this story. Manns Harbor is the centralized maintenance and repair hub for the state ferry fleet, where vessels are inspected, repaired, and serviced. It is part of the infrastructure that allows the ferry system to remain reliable. The work overlaps with private marine trades, including welding, painting, engines, electrical systems, dock work, vessel repair, parts, scheduling, and skilled labor. The state already operates a public marine fleet and that fleet depends on the same kind of workforce and skill sets that show up in boatyards, ferry operations, public vessels, and defense-adjacent maritime work.

The ferry system also gives North Carolina a practical window into innovation in maritime technologies. Catherine Peele, deputy director for maritime operations and programming for the NCDOT Ferry Division, said the state continues to monitor vessel technology, propulsion systems, and infrastructure "as technologies mature and become appropriate for our operating environment." Vessel size, route length, weather, currents, vehicle capacity, terminal

³⁰ Glenda Mayo, Jake Smithwick, and Robert Gooljar, *Freight Planning Tool for the NCDOT Ferry Division*, FHWA/NC/2019-10 (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Transportation, September 25, 2019), <https://connect.ncdot.gov/projects/research/rmaprojdocs/rp%202019-10%20final%20report%20-%20approved.pdf>.

infrastructure, dwell time, maintenance requirements, and service reliability all shape whether a technology used elsewhere can work in North Carolina.

7. Maritime Manufacturing, Defense Suppliers, and Dual-Use Capacity

Hampton Roads is a relevant reference point for the region's maritime ambitions, but the relationship requires context. The concentration of naval and maritime activity north of the state line in Virginia, encompassing shipbuilding, fleet maintenance, defense contracting, and port operations, also creates supplier demand that extends into northeastern North Carolina. This is already happening today, however the scale, potential growth, and sustainability of this depend largely on decisions made in Richmond or other places. The proximity advantage is real in miles. Whether it materializes through commercial activity depends on supplier development work that goes beyond site readiness.

Despite its proximity to the mature shipbuilding sector in Virginia, prime shipbuilding is not the most realistic opportunity for North Carolina. Nearby Newport News Shipbuilding and Connecticut's General Dynamics Electric Boat in Groton, dominate that segment of the defense maritime industrial base with a headstart decades in the making. Yet, the maritime sector is more than shipyards. North Carolina's realistic opportunities are in the supplier tiers below prime: fabrication,



*Hilton RR Bridge, Wilmington, a part of the STRACNET Corridor
Photo (c) Wilmington Star-News*

coatings, machining, electrical systems, marine controls, composites, welding, repair, maintenance, logistics, and cybersecurity compliance. The state already has a defense maritime presence through Military Ocean Terminal Sunny Point (MOTSU) on the Cape Fear River, which ties maritime logistics to the rail and highway networks that support national defense mobility, including the STRACNET and STRAHNET corridors.³¹ Can North Carolina's supply chain be a differentiator to grow military activity in the state the way it has supported general industrial development and recruiting? Several efforts underway in the state point in that direction, including NC State's industrial extension work, NCMBC's maritime industrial base programming, and the NC Chamber's First in Defense coalition to name a few.

NC State Industry Expansion Solutions, the state's industrial extension service, leads the North Carolina Maritime Manufacturing Initiative (NCMMI) as part of its defense industry work and describes goals around industrial capacity, workforce readiness, advanced technology integration, cybersecurity compliance, supply chain strength, and policy support.³² Early working

³¹ STRACNET (Strategic Rail Corridor Network), is the rail equivalent to the highway-based STRAHNET (Strategic Highway Network). Both systems are designated by U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) to ensure critical transportation infrastructure supports rapid military mobilization and deployment. U.S. Department of Transportation. "Strategic Highway Network (STRAHNET)." *USDOT Open Data*. Accessed June 22, 2026. <https://data-usdot.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/usdot::strategic-highway-network-strahnet/explore>

³² NC State University Industry Extension Services, "Defense Industry Initiatives," accessed June 15, 2026, <https://ies.ncsu.edu/defense/>.

group discussions suggest that the most immediate need is practical supplier-development support for small and mid-sized manufacturers navigating CMMC, federal contracting, quality requirements, workforce constraints, and prime-contractor relationships.³³ The North Carolina Military Business Center (NCMBC) defines the maritime industrial base broadly, including commercial cargo handling, shipbuilding, port logistics, naval ship construction, fleet maintenance, and advanced maritime manufacturing.³⁴ For North Carolina, the most credible near-term role is supplier development. Machining, welding, coatings, composites, electrical systems, controls, cybersecurity compliance, maintenance, repair, logistics, and specialized fabrication can serve commercial marine, public marine, energy, and defense customers.

The NC Chamber's First in Defense coalition gives this discussion a broader business and competitiveness context. Launched with the North Carolina Critical Technologies Alliance, the coalition is focused on defense manufacturing, critical technologies, federal defense investment, and dual-use industry growth. Maritime suppliers fit because many of the same capabilities in defense, including machining, coatings, composites, electrical systems, logistics, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, quantum, and advanced manufacturing, can support maritime customers when firms have the right certifications, systems, contracting, and supplier-development support.³⁵ Maritime suppliers should fit within that work where the state can help firms move from adjacent capability to qualified supplier status.

Success for North Carolina does not require outpacing Newport News or Groton, but rather to leverage the already-active industrial ecosystem in NC for new maritime applications. A welding shop, coatings firm, machine shop, electrical contractor, composite manufacturer, logistics provider, cybersecurity consultant, or vessel repair business may serve a commercial boatbuilder today and a defense, energy, public-sector, or marine industrial customer tomorrow. That is the kind of practical *dual-use capacity* North Carolina can work on without pretending it will compete head-to-head with the largest naval or commercial shipyards.

The pivot is, however, rarely automatic. Defense work requires significant cybersecurity compliance, advanced quality systems, and different contracting relationships. Yet the capabilities here already show potential, and that is where North Carolina's maritime supply chain opportunities become more realistic. This is where the state's existing institutions and initiatives can add value. NCMMI can help manufacturers understand where their current capabilities match maritime supply chain needs. NCMBC can help firms identify defense and maritime customers, understand contracting requirements, and connect to supplier opportunities. First in Defense keeps maritime manufacturing connected to the state's broader defense competitiveness agenda and state-level policies. MCARTEC, the Maritime Cybersecurity Applied Research, Technology & Education Center at UNC-Wilmington adds additional dual-use resources. Their focus on risk assessment, remediation planning, workforce training, and cybersecurity standards help maritime firms to serve government, defense, and other security-sensitive customers. Can these resources, and the broader strategic priorities that are connected, help more existing North Carolina firms move from adjacent capability to qualified, active supplier status?

³³ Note: The NC Chamber Foundation is an active participant in the NCMMI supply chain working group, particularly where the initiative intersects with statewide priorities in supply chain competitiveness, infrastructure, manufacturing, and economic development.

³⁴ North Carolina Military Business Center, "Maritime Industrial Base," accessed June 15, 2026, <https://www.ncmbc.us/maritime-industrial-base/>.

³⁵ NC Chamber, "Military and Defense," accessed June 15, 2026, <https://ncchamber.com/issue/military-defense/>. Note: The NC Chamber Foundation is affiliated with the NC Chamber.

8. Energy Logistics and Project Cargo

Energy logistics should stay in the maritime conversation because large energy projects often depend on ports, barges, storage, laydown space, heavy-haul routes, rail connections, cranes, permits, and close coordination with utilities and contractors. Transformers, substation components, cable, turbines, steel, modular equipment, and other oversized cargo can create transportation problems that standard truck or rail service cannot solve easily. Offshore wind is one visible example of that broader project-cargo issue, but it should be treated carefully in North Carolina. BOEM identifies Kitty Hawk North, Kitty Hawk South, and Carolina Long Bay as offshore renewable activities connected to the state, while also noting the federal offshore wind review and leasing pause.³⁶ The project environment in wind energy is uncertain.



Diverse, niche and project cargo serviced efficiently at the Port of Morehead City. Photo (c) NC Ports

Dominion's Coastal Virginia Offshore Wind provides regional context in the other direction. BOEM approved the project's construction and operations plan in January 2024, including 176 turbines, three offshore substations, and about 2,600 megawatts of capacity roughly 23.5 nautical miles east of Virginia Beach.³⁷ This project shows the scale of maritime logistics that energy infrastructure can create, but doesn't guarantee near-term demand explicitly.

The more durable issue for North Carolina is project cargo. Energy, utility, industrial, and construction projects use turbines, transformers, substations, steel, cable, modular equipment, and other heavy or awkward components. Those movements may require ports, barges, laydown, route clearance, cranes, storage, permits, and coordination with utilities and contractors. Morehead City, Riverbulk, and inland connections all become relevant when a cargo needs water access or specialized handling. The demand has to be proven project by project, but the active assets in North Carolina are real.

9. Blue Economy, Ocean Tech, and Coastal Research

Some of these activities are often described as the blue economy, but the stronger North Carolina story is about the programs and institutions helping turn water-linked ideas into business activity. UNC-Wilmington's All Blue initiative brings attention to sectors such as marine engineering,

³⁶ Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, "North Carolina Activities," accessed June 12, 2026, <https://www.boem.gov/renewable-energy/state-activities/north-carolina-activities>.

³⁷ Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, "Coastal Virginia Offshore Wind Commercial Project," accessed June 12, 2026, <https://www.boem.gov/renewable-energy/state-activities/CVOW-C>.

sustainable seafood and aquaculture, marine biotechnology, coastal resilience, and sustainable hospitality and recreation. Those areas overlap with several industries already discussed here and point to a growth path where traditional maritime businesses, university research, entrepreneurs, and coastal communities are working from the same asset base. UNCW's All Blue has also produced a maritime asset map, the Shellfish Mariculture Propel business incubator, the NC Oyster Trail initiative, startup and entrepreneur support, and additional blue economy programming.³⁸ Those activities can help firms and communities connect ideas, customers, investors, workforce, and technical assistance.

DEFINITION

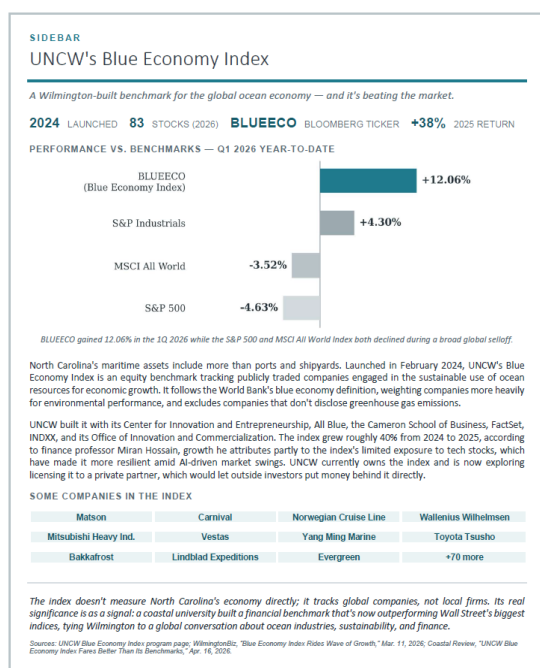
The blue economy is the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and jobs while preserving the health of ocean ecosystems.

Source: World Bank, "What is the Blue Economy?"

UNCW's Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship gives this work a practical entrepreneurship home. The Center's role is broader than blue economy programming alone, but its coastal location gives it a natural fit with founders, researchers, students, investors, and companies working around marine technology, shellfish, coastal resilience, ocean data, sustainability, and maritime services. CIE and All Blue serve a convening function for the region. Their supported efforts include the Blue Economy Index, the Ocean Innovation Conference, and Shellfish Mariculture Propel. That kind of organizing capacity is part of the state's maritime asset base because early-stage sectors need more than ideas. They need customers, capital, workforce, mentors, technical assistance, and places where industry and research can find each other. Another initiative based

at UNCW is the NC EcoTech program supported by National Science Foundation (NSF) funding, focused on ecosystem technologies that connect to North Carolina's working waterfront, research, and coastal infrastructure base.³⁹

Beyond the state, several blue economy and ocean technology models offer useful comparisons. The EDA-designated Ocean Tech Hub in southeastern New England is the most formal federal example. Led by Rhode Island Commerce and regional partners across Rhode Island and southeastern Massachusetts, the hub focuses on accelerating the development, testing, commercialization, and deployment of ocean technologies by connecting businesses, innovators, entrepreneurs, infrastructure, expertise, and workforce partners.⁴⁰ Its focus areas include undersea robotics, autonomous systems, sensors, artificial intelligence, advanced materials, offshore energy, ocean data systems, and technologies tied to maritime operations and national security.⁴¹



[Full-sized infographic available here.](#)

³⁸ University of North Carolina Wilmington, "About All Blue, The Alliance for the Blue Economy."

³⁹ NC EcoTech. "About Us." Accessed June 22, 2026. <https://nccotech.org/about-us/>

⁴⁰ U.S. Economic Development Administration, "Ocean Tech Hub," accessed June 18, 2026, <https://www.eda.gov/funding/programs/regional-technology-and-innovation-hubs/2023/Ocean-Tech-Hub>.

⁴¹ Ibid

Virginia offers a more regional maritime innovation model through Hampton Roads and Old Dominion University, where maritime initiatives connect the Port of Virginia, the Navy, shipbuilding and repair, offshore wind, workforce, and applied research. ODU's maritime mission is to provide education, research, and innovation that promote the blue economy, and its work shows how a coastal university can become a convener for maritime enterprise.⁴² Mississippi's Gulf Blue initiative provides another relevant comparison. Led by the University of Southern Mississippi and Gulf Coast partners, Gulf Blue organizes around uncrewed maritime systems, aquaculture, marine-friendly plastics, ocean and coastal data analytics, smart ports, and sea-space systems, while connecting research scientists, federal agencies, industry partners, entrepreneurs, and startups. Los Angeles adds a more accelerator-driven example with Braid Theory, a venture advisory and accelerator based at the Port of Los Angeles' Braid Space at AltaSea, where entrepreneurs have access to co-working space, industry advisors, commercialization support, and demonstration test sites on land and in the water.⁴³ Its LA Blue Accelerator supports engineering and science-led startups working across the blue economy, including ocean, freshwater, and coastal regions.



Cape Fear Community College's Marine Technology Program offers relevant training on the water. Photo (c) Jacqui Degan

North Carolina has many of the ingredients of an ocean technology and blue economy ecosystem, even if they are spread across institutions, regions, and markets. UNCW and All Blue, NC EcoTech, NC State's Center for Marine Sciences Duke Marine Lab in Beaufort,⁴⁴ UNC-Chapel Hill's Institute of Marine Sciences in Morehead City⁴⁵, and the Coastal Studies Institute in Wanchese provide research, entrepreneurship, and applied innovation capacity. Cape Fear Community College's Marine Technology program⁴⁶ and other

coastal community college and workforce programs add hands-on training. The ports, ferry operations, mariculture businesses, and coastal test environments provide operating assets, customers, and real-world conditions. Together these pieces give North Carolina a meaningful foundation, but that base remains spread across multiple institutions and markets.

North Carolina's coastal innovation base extends beyond traditional marine science. NC State's Plant Sciences Initiative and the North Carolina Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services (NCDACS) / NC State research station network show how agriculture, water management,

⁴² Old Dominion University, "Maritime Initiatives," accessed July 7, 2026, <https://www.odu.edu/maritime>; Old Dominion University Foundation, "ODU, HRMC Announce Maritime Innovation Initiatives," accessed July 7, 2026, <https://www.odufoundation.com/about/news/maritime-innovation-initiative/>

⁴³ Braid Theory, "Los Angeles: AltaSea at the Port of LA," accessed July 7, 2026, <https://www.braidtheory.com/locations/los-angeles>

⁴⁴ Duke University Nicholas School of the Environment. "Duke University Marine Lab." <https://nicholas.duke.edu/marinelab/>

⁴⁵ University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "Institute of Marine Sciences." *Earth, Marine and Environmental Sciences*. <https://emes.unc.edu/ims/>

⁴⁶ Cape Fear Community College. "Marine Technology." <https://cfcc.edu/marine-technology/>

digital tools, field testing, and commercialization can overlap with coastal and eastern North Carolina assets. NC State and NCDA&CS operate the second-largest research station network in the country, with 18 stations and four field laboratories, and NC State's Drone Pilot Project connects the Plant Sciences Initiative, Plant Breeding Consortium, NC Agricultural Research Service, USDA Agricultural Research, and NCDA&CS around drone data collection and analysis for plant research.⁴⁷ Tidewater Research Station and the Vernon G. James Research and Extension Center in Plymouth bring together field crops, soil and water research, livestock, aquaculture, drainage infrastructure, laboratories, fiber connectivity, and extension capacity in northeastern North Carolina.⁴⁸ Castle Hayne's Horticultural Crops Research Station adds another coastal-plain example near Wilmington, with horticultural research, plant disease and genetics expertise, greenhouses, cold storage, weather data, blueberry breeding, and even work on beach grass and sea oats for coastal stabilization.⁴⁹ These assets are agricultural rather than maritime, but they show how coastal and eastern North Carolina research infrastructure can support applied technology, water-linked production systems, data-driven decision-making, and tech transfer.

Coastal research and resilience modeling fit naturally alongside agricultural and marine research assets because they operate at the confluence of water, land, infrastructure, technology and perhaps most universal, risk. The Coastal Studies Institute on Roanoke Island gives NC an applied research platform tied to sustainable ocean industry, marine operations, and coastal systems.⁵⁰ North Carolina also has private companies working where coastal resilience, materials, monitoring, and marine environments meet. In their September 2025 research *Jumpstarting North Carolina's Blue Economy*, RTI International identifies North Carolina companies such as Natrx, Native Shorelines, and Sandbar Oyster Company as examples of businesses developing or deploying technologies for erosion control, living shorelines, oyster habitat, and coastal protection.⁵¹ Research capabilities become valuable to supply chain assets when they help companies, communities, or public agencies make better decisions about site design, climate risk, marine data, commercialization, emergency strategy, and long-term asset reliability. Research can and does draw capital, public and private, into the maritime environment.

International business recruitment, a key priority of NC's *First in Opportunity* strategic economic development plan, also fits into this ocean technology conversation. North Carolina's recent business exchange with Ireland and Northern Ireland, supported by RDU Airport Authority, the NC Chamber, NI Chamber, local chambers in Ireland, state leaders, and private-sector partners, shows how international relationships can create practical economic development openings. That same network has introduced North Carolina leaders to companies developing next-generation marine technologies, including Belfast-based Artemis Technologies. Artemis' electric hydro-foiling vessels point to where segments of the global maritime market are moving toward lower-emission operations, quieter vessels, reduced wake, shoreside charging, and new terminal infrastructure

⁴⁷ Sam Jones, "Future-proof Farming Starts with Fiber," *CALS Magazine*, North Carolina State University College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, August 16, 2024, <https://magazine.cals.ncsu.edu/agricultural-technology-future-proof-farming-starts-with-fiber/>

⁴⁸ North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, "Tidewater Research Station," accessed July 10, 2026, <https://www.ncagr.gov/divisions/research-stations/locations/research-stations-tidewater-research-station> ; North Carolina State University Extension, "About: Vernon G. James Research and Extension Center," accessed July 10, 2026, <https://vernonjames.ces.ncsu.edu/about/>

⁴⁹ North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, "Horticultural Crops Research Station: Castle Hayne," accessed July 10, 2026, <https://www.ncagr.gov/divisions/research-stations/locations/research-stations-horticultural-crops-research-station-castle-hayne>

⁵⁰ Coastal Studies Institute, "About CSI," <https://www.coastalstudiesinstitute.org/>.

⁵¹ Jess Wilkinson, Adams Bailey, and Sara Lawrence, *Jumpstarting North Carolina's Blue Economy: Opportunities in Ecosystem Technologies*, RTI Press Publication No. PB-0031-2509 (Durham: RTI Press, September 2025), <https://doi.org/10.3768/rtipress.2025.pb.0031.2509>

needs.⁵² Those technologies may not fit every North Carolina marine use case. Vessel size, route length, weather, currents, vehicle capacity, terminal infrastructure, utility coordination, maintenance, and operating conditions determine if a technology used elsewhere can work here. North Carolina can make itself a more credible location for maritime technology investment by connecting firms to customers, research institutions, skilled workers, suppliers, waterfront access, and business support.

10. Growth Conditions for Maritime Competitiveness

Most relevant caveats belong here rather than after every asset story. Water-linked assets need physical reliability. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Wilmington District describes dredging as necessary to provide access to ports and harbors and to maintain inland navigation links, with frequent maintenance dredging required for many channels.⁵³ In North Carolina, the same issue touches ports, ferries, Wanchese, Oregon Inlet, the AIWW, Riverbulk, basins, ramps, and working waterfronts, where shoaling or shifting channels can impact service reliability



Dredging on the Cape Fear. Photo (c) C. Bellamy, Star News

Growth also depends on whether water-linked sites can actually support business operations. Protected water helps only when a firm can control the site, reach it by road, power the work, hire the right people, secure permits and insurance, and stage materials without fighting the land around it. The exact needs vary by industry, but the value of water as infrastructure depends on the conditions that make it usable. Glenn Anderson of Cape Fear Ocean Labs said, “The real

⁵² Artemis Technologies, “Artemis EF-24 Passenger Vessels Delivered to Belfast, Marking Major Milestone,” January 13, 2026, <https://www.artemistechnologies.co.uk/news/artemis-ef-24-passenger-vessels-delivered-belfast/>

⁵³ U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Wilmington District, “Dredging,” accessed June 18, 2026, <https://www.saw.usace.army.mil/Missions/Navigation/Dredging/>.

place where you get value creation out of R&D is when you have the supply chain cluster.” That is an important growth condition across the maritime economy.

Wanchese needs basin access, dockage, utilities, tenant mix, and active management. Perquimans needs tenants, workforce, operating cost advantages, and private capital to follow public site investment. Shellfish mariculture needs leases, clean water, hatcheries, working waterfronts, cold chain, distribution, insurance, and markets. The ferry system needs vessels, terminals, ramps, docks, mariners, maintenance trades, capital planning, and reliable navigation. Maritime research and technology become more useful when they connect to customers, suppliers, test sites, workforce, and deployment pathway.

Cape Fear Ocean Labs, a Wilmington-based blue economy initiative, developed a custom blue commercial industry analysis through research with NOAA’s Office for Coastal Management covering Living Resources, Marine Construction, Marine Transportation, Offshore Mineral Extraction, and Ship and Boatbuilding.⁵⁴ CFOL economists found that 50 percent of North Carolina’s 20 coastal counties had an identifiable “blue commercial” profile in 2020. The analysis also found that New Hanover, Dare, Pender, and Beaufort accounted for 82 percent of reported blue commercial employment and 91 percent of reported blue commercial GDP in North Carolina.⁵⁵ North Carolina has measurable maritime activity, but the commercial base is uneven and more concentrated than the coastline alone might suggest.

The same research also compared North Carolina with peer and median coastal-state benchmarks and found the state below the median coastal state in blue commercial employment, wages, and GDP. North Carolina outperformed its peers in Living Resources and Marine Construction but lagged in Marine Transportation, and Ship and Boatbuilding.⁵⁶ Which assets can grow with better focus, workforce, or reliability? Which opportunities need validation before they become public priorities? North Carolina needs better mapping of marine industrial sites, clearer data on maritime employment, stronger trades pipelines, realistic freight business cases, and early design for dredging, permitting, and resilience. More information can help determine what approaches deserve more attention and which need stronger evidence before public dollars or institutional effort follow.

11. Ports as Anchors in a Wider System

The ports remain anchors in the system. Morehead City is a breakbulk and bulk facility four miles from the open water of the Atlantic Ocean, with a 45-foot channel, Norfolk Southern rail service, more than one million square feet of covered storage supporting bulk and breakbulk, nine berths, two Liebherr cranes, and Radio Island, a 150-acre site across the Newport River with municipal water and sewer.⁵⁷ Those are serious assets, especially for bulk, breakbulk, storage, heavy cargo, and port-adjacent industrial activity.

⁵⁴ Dineva, Polina, Ravi Chittilla, *2023 Consideration of North Carolina’s Blue Commercial Economy*, Cape Fear Ocean Labs for NOAA Office for Coastal Management, March 2023. *Data source note:* figures draw on 2023 analysis of NC’s blue commercial economy prepared by NOAA’s Office for Coastal Management, built on NOAA’s Economics: National Ocean Watch (ENOW) data for 2020. The analysis groups Living Resources, Marine Construction, Marine Transportation, Offshore Mineral Extraction, and Ship and Boat Building into a custom “blue commercial” category that excludes Tourism and Recreation. Because that category and several of its measures were defined for this study rather than drawn from a standard public data series, the figures are best read as a county-level and peer-state calibration of where North Carolina’s maritime commercial activity is concentrated, not as official state economic indicators. The underlying ENOW data are public and can be accessed directly.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ North Carolina Ports, “Port of Morehead City,” accessed June 18, 2026, <https://ncports.com/port-facilities/port-of-morehead-city/>.

Wilmington is located 26 miles from open sea on the Cape Fear River, and the Port of Wilmington has a 42-foot channel, nine berths, 6,768 feet of wharf frontage, seven container cranes, a 600,000+ TEU capacity container terminal, one million square feet of covered storage, CSX intermodal rail service, and direct access to Interstates 40 and 95. The port serves container, bulk, breakbulk, ro-ro, reefer, cold storage, inland transportation, and foreign trade zone activity, which makes it the state's main platform for containerized trade, cold chain, manufactured goods, agricultural exports, and inland market access.

Recent federal investment also reinforces the importance of landside access and terminal reliability. In July 2026, North Carolina Ports received a \$9.8 million federal BUILD grant for a \$12.4 million off-terminal access and parking facility at the Port of Wilmington, including a pedestrian bridge and shuttle connections.⁵⁸ The project is intended to remove private vehicles from the active marine terminal, separate personal vehicles and pedestrians from cargo handling, rail operations, and heavy truck movements, and improve freight mobility, terminal capacity, and operational reliability.



Refrigerated Containers in purpose-built, powered stacks at the Port of Wilmington. Photo (c) NC Ports

NC Ports' 2031 Strategic Plan reinforces the importance of the broader maritime story. The plan identifies focus areas including serving North Carolina, becoming the Cold Gateway of the Mid-Atlantic, driving integrated bulk solutions, and seizing breakbulk opportunities. It also sets targets of 1.1 million additional bulk tons and 0.5 million additional breakbulk tons by 2031.⁵⁹ Those

priorities overlap with broader maritime asset development, including food and cold chain, bulk and breakbulk cargo, project cargo, and inland connectivity.

Charlotte Inland Port shows that maritime assets can reach beyond the coast when inland service is reliable. The facility serves the I-85 and I-77 corridors through intermodal service to and from Wilmington, with 20 acres, container yard operations, and staging for loaded and empty containers.⁶⁰ Add into the mix inland intermodal and rail service through CSX's Carolina Connector in Rocky Mount, the CSX Charlotte inland yard, Norfolk Southern's intermodal facility next to Charlotte Douglas International Airport, and the NS inland facility in Greensboro. These hinterland assets prove a basic point that maritime assets become more useful when reducing friction for inland customers and connecting coastal infrastructure to the state's manufacturing, agriculture, and distribution base.

Wilmington, Morehead City, waterways, ferries, working waterfronts, rural marine sites, maintenance yards, and coastal research all belong in the competitiveness conversation with

⁵⁸ Johanna F. Still, "\$9.8M Federal Grant to Fund New Port Access, Parking Facility," *WilmingtonBiz*, July 16, 2026, <https://www.wilmingtonbiz.com/maritime/2026/07/16/maritime/27674>

⁵⁹ North Carolina Ports, "North Carolina State Ports Authority Releases New Strategic Plan," March 30, 2026, <https://ncports.com/about-the-ports/news/north-carolina-state-ports-authority-releases-new-strategic-plan-2/>.

⁶⁰ North Carolina Ports, "Charlotte Inland Port," <https://ncports.com/port-facilities/charlotte-inland-port/>.

other infrastructure verticals such as energy, water, and broadband. The ports provide scale and institutional capacity, customer relationships, and access to global markets. The wider maritime ecosystem gives those port assets more ways to create value. Cold storage, seafood and shellfish, working waterfronts, ferries, rural marine sites, maintenance yards, project cargo assets, marine suppliers, inland manufacturers, and coastal research all create activity around the ports and extend the state's maritime reach inland and along the coast. The ports remain the foundation of the state's maritime strategy, but North Carolina's maritime opportunity truly extends beyond the gates.

Conclusion

North Carolina's maritime opportunity is scattered, which makes it easy to underestimate. Deepwater ports, marine highways, ferries, working waterfronts, boatyards, seafood dealers, shellfish growers, defense and dual-use suppliers, Riverbulk, Wanchese, Perquimans, Manns Harbor, Morehead City, Wilmington, coastal research institutions, and project-cargo assets each show a different part of the same story. Water-linked infrastructure can support supply chain competitiveness when it helps businesses and public agencies move, build, maintain, process, repair, connect, and recover.

We should avoid making two mistakes. One is treating every waterfront asset as if it is automatically investment-ready. The other is treating maritime assets as a narrow coastal topic that sits apart from economic development, freight reliability, workforce, energy, defense, agriculture, seafood, tourism, and public infrastructure. The evidence points toward a more useful middle ground that North Carolina can take maritime opportunities more seriously *and* still require practical business cases, better data, clear operating conditions, and honest treatment of environmental, storm, and federal policy risk.

A stronger maritime focus would not push the state to imitate Virginia, South Carolina, or Georgia. It would help North Carolina understand its own assets and decide where to lean in. The state has places where water access already supports real industries, from boatbuilding clusters to an operating barge terminal. It has public assets including the ferry system that need maintenance and labor. It has supplier capabilities that could move from commercial marine work towards defense, energy and public-sector customers if companies can clear compliance and contracting. And it has an active blue economy where entrepreneurship and research are taking root, but have not yet reached their full potential.

Seeing all of these pieces together can help move North Carolina from a narrower ports conversation to a fuller maritime competitiveness conversation. The ports remain the anchor, but maritime opportunity extends through the firms, public systems, working waterfronts, research institutions, industrial sites, transportation links, and skilled workers that give those assets economic value. The case for maritime investment should remain practical, focusing on where the asset solves a real operating problem, serves real users, supports a real market, and gives North Carolina a stronger competitive position, as those are the situations that deserve a closer look.

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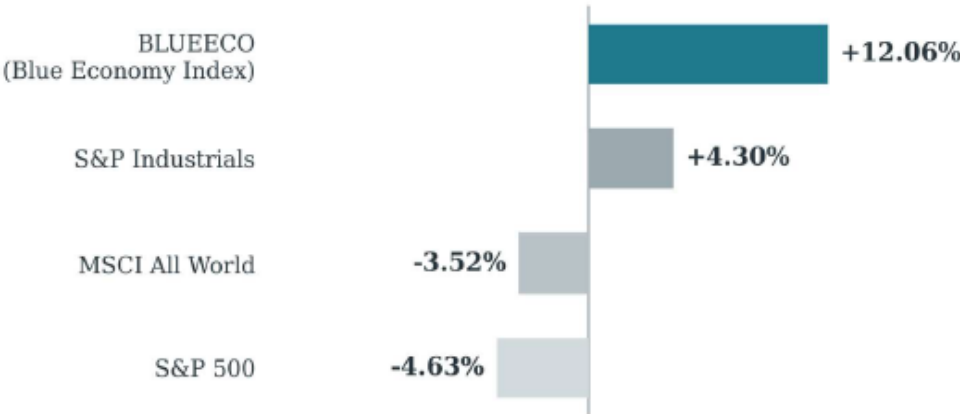
SIDEBAR

UNCW's Blue Economy Index

A Wilmington-built benchmark for the global ocean economy — and it's beating the market.

2024 LAUNCHED **83** STOCKS (2026) **BLUEECO** BLOOMBERG TICKER **+38%** 2025 RETURN

PERFORMANCE VS. BENCHMARKS — Q1 2026 YEAR-TO-DATE



BLUEECO gained 12.06% in the 1Q 2026 while the S&P 500 and MSCI All World Index both declined during a broad global selloff.

North Carolina's maritime assets include more than ports and shipyards. Launched in February 2024, UNCW's Blue Economy Index is an equity benchmark tracking publicly traded companies engaged in the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth. It follows the World Bank's blue economy definition, weighting companies more heavily for environmental performance, and excludes companies that don't disclose greenhouse gas emissions.

UNCW built it with its Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, All Blue, the Cameron School of Business, FactSet, INDXX, and its Office of Innovation and Commercialization. The index grew roughly 40% from 2024 to 2025, according to finance professor Miran Hossain, growth he attributes partly to the index's limited exposure to tech stocks, which have made it more resilient amid AI-driven market swings. UNCW currently owns the index and is now exploring licensing it to a private partner, which would let outside investors put money behind it directly.

SOME COMPANIES IN THE INDEX

Matson	Carnival	Norwegian Cruise Line	Wallenius Wilhelmsen
Mitsubishi Heavy Ind.	Vestas	Yang Ming Marine	Toyota Tsusho
Bakkafrost	Lindblad Expeditions	Evergreen	+70 more

The index doesn't measure North Carolina's economy directly; it tracks global companies, not local firms. Its real significance is as a signal: a coastal university built a financial benchmark that's now outperforming Wall Street's biggest indices, tying Wilmington to a global conversation about ocean industries, sustainability, and finance.

Sources: UNCW Blue Economy Index program page; WilmingtonBiz, "Blue Economy Index Rides Wave of Growth," Mar. 11, 2026; Coastal Review, "UNCW Blue Economy Index Fares Better Than Its Benchmarks," Apr. 16, 2026.