HRBT SEABIRD MITIGATION – RECOMMENDATIONS

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History of Seabirds on HRBT – Seabirds have nested on the south island of the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel for forty years (Table 1). The number of breeding pairs has fluctuated over time due to changes in conditions of other colony sites and onsite management. The south island of HRBT has become the largest mixed seabird colony within the mid-Atlantic region and is particularly significant for the management of several Virginia populations including common tern, black skimmer, gull-billed tern, royal tern, sandwich tern and laughing gull. All of these populations have experienced dramatic declines in excess of 50% in recent decades and HRBT has become a strategically important nesting site.

Table 1. Estimated number of breeding pairs nesting on HRBT south island and (% of state population) from 1983 through 2018. Sources are Byrd et al. 1983, Watts and Byrd 1994, Watts 2004, Watts and Paxton 2008, Watts and Paxton 2014 and Watts et al. 2019.

Species	1983	1993	2003	2008	2013	2018
Common Tern	700 (13.4)	3134 (48.6)	800 (42.3)	862 (59.8)	1158 (58.3)	605 (45.8)
Black Skimmer	118 (2.9)	191 (6.2)	84 (4.6)	158 (11.6)	215 (14.3)	602 (38.4)
Gull-billed Tern	-----	2 (0.3)	18 (5.6)	16 (5.1)	39 (13.2)	24 (6.9)
Laughing Gull	-----	-----	2711 (6.1)	3782 (10.2)	1892 (7.8)	3937 (23.6)
Royal Tern	-----	-----	-----	833 (25.7)	5188 (97.3)	3448 (84.0)
Herring Gull	-----	-----	-----	114 (4.2)	43 (1.3)	65 (3.3)
Great Black-backed	-----	-----	-----	6 (0.4)	5 (0.5)	10 (0.9)
Sandwich Tern	-----	-----	-----	-----	23 (82.1)	100 (98.0)
Snowy Egret	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	21 (2.4)

Mitigating the Loss of HRBT – Without appropriate mitigation, the permanent loss of HRBT as a nesting site is expected to have an impact on the status and distribution of some seabird populations in Virginia. Several management actions could be taken to support these populations including the restoration of historic nesting sites and/or the creation of new sites. We support alternatives that mitigate this loss to the full assemblage of seabirds that will be impacted.

Long-term Mitigation – Goals of mitigation should include 1) complete replacement of the functions currently provided by HRBT to the full assemblage of seabirds supported and 2) maintaining seabird populations as integral components of the Hampton Roads ecosystems to which they belong. Mitigation alternatives should be sought that minimize conflicts with other user groups including the shipping industry, U.S. Department of Defense, the fishing industry and the public. The preferred alternative would be the creation of an island dedicated to seabirds that would meet their needs in perpetuity.

Short-term (bridge) Mitigation – Given that long-term mitigation will not be in place before the 2020 breeding season, we support short-term mitigation that would provide a “bridge” for the birds until a permanent solution may be completed, as long as the commitment to long-term mitigation and its funding are clear and committed to by all necessary agency partners before transition in leadership in 2022. Alternatives for consideration should be local to facilitate adoption by the birds and should support the full assemblage of species.