Summary of Mobile Bay National Estuary Program Project Implementation Committee Prioritization Working Group Activities – August 15, 2012

On Thursday. August 9, 2012, we identified data necessary to undertake prioritization and determination of focus areas. Jeff DeQuattro recorded sets that we felt were necessary, and I have attached that file (Priority Areas…). There was extensive overlap between this list and the list of data that were determined to be necessary in order to develop Watershed Profiles as precursors to planning efforts prepared in 2011 as a PIC charge. I have also attached that list as Data Needs… We also briefly discussed the EPA Headquarters' Healthy Watersheds Initiative (HWI) efforts to evaluate/assess the health/condition of 12-digit HUCs in the Mobile Bay Watershed throughout Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia using available data sets that describe water quality, ecological integrity, and physical, hydrological, and chemical attributes of these basins. This product will be available by the end of the year.

On Monday, August 11, 2012, Jeff DeQuattro, Sam St. John (representing Mark Berte), Lee Walters, Dr. Jim Connors, Dan Everson, and Tom Herder met at the MBNEP office to move closer towards a prioritization framework. I presented ideas provided by Roberta Swann, including graphing watershed stress levels as functions of condition for guidance towards balancing restoration (poor condition) with protection (high stress/good condition). Roberta also felt that by using the HWI evaluation of most- and least-stressed watersheds based upon scientific parameters to provide preliminary focus, we could further discriminate/prioritize based upon human social and political factors (including agreement/will to restore/implement).

Sam St. John suggested grouping prioritization factors by headings, such as ecosystem integrity (under which we would include species diversity, habitat availability/condition, population size, presence/absence of invasive spp., etc.), water quality (perhaps representing established impairment criteria), etc.

With rivers and streams (along with riparian areas), freshwater wetlands, and intertidal marshes and flats agreed upon as habitats of focus in prioritization efforts, there was some discussion about loosely prioritizing even those habitat types. There appeared to be some agreement that among those three, intertidal marshes and flats displayed the most resiliency, with streams and rivers perhaps under the most stress/pressure. Dan Everson felt that using sedimentation to evaluate stream condition was somewhat misguided. He felt that stream condition should be assessed by morphology and that sedimentation was a factor underlying stream dynamics, whether under pristine or stressed condition. He provided a 15-minute presentation to inform the group about predictable course of stream degradation from reference (the morphology of which can be graphically determined by watershed area) to degraded (when area of impervious cover approaches and exceeds a threshold near seven percent causing stream deepening and bank degradation).

Before the meeting adjourned, Tom Herder was charged with determining whether the HWI effort was flexible enough to specifically incorporate our goals of developing a prioritization framework. Roberta

agreed to talk to that group to see if a presentation to inform and communicate with this working group was possible in the very near future. We will…