

Mobile Bay National Estuary Program Executive Committee Meeting
GoogleMeet Virtual Meeting
Friday, August 27, 2021 10:00 am - 12:00 pm

Attendees:

Judy Adams, Alabama State Port Authority
Scott Bannon, ADCNR Marine Resources
Chris Blankenship, ADCNR
Rhonda Bryars, Alabama Soil & Water Conservation Committee (for William Puckett)
Bob Chappelle, Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce (for Bill Sisson)
Jennifer Denson, Partners for Environmental Progress
Duane De Freese, Indian River Lagoon NEP
Walter Ernest, Pelican Coast Conservancy
Mimi Fearn, Dog River Clearwater Revival
Leslie Gahagan, City of Foley
Judy Haner, The Nature Conservancy
Patric Harper, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Helene Hassell, Dauphin Island Sea Lab Foundation
Amy Hunter, ADCNR RESTORE
John Lehrter, Dauphin Island Sea Lab
Fred Leslie, ADEM
Merceria Ludgood, Mobile County Commission
Ben Malone, USDA-NRCS
Patti McCurdy, ADCNR State Lands
Justin McDonald, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Eliska Morgan, Thompson Engineering
Elizabeth Roney, Congressman Jerry Carl's Office
Frank Smith, Wilkins Miller Wealth Management
LaDon Swann, MS-AL Sea Grant
Chris Thomas, U.S. EPA Region 4
John Valentine, Dauphin Island Sea Lab

MBNEP Staff Present: *Roberta Swann, Christian Miller, Jason Kudulis, Tiffany England, Tom Herder, Kelley Barfoot, Madison Blanchard, Henry Perkins, Herndon Graddick, Melissa Partyka, and Bethany Hudson*

- 1. Introductions/Call to Order:** Ms. Swann asked that each person sign in using the chat box for attendance.
- 2. Approval of Minutes:** Commissioner Blankenship asked for comments or revisions to the minutes from the May 27, 2021 meeting. Helene Hassell made a motion to approve, Eliska Morgan seconded the motion.
- 3. Presentations:**

Donald Killorn, Executive Director of the Pensacola & Perdido Bays Estuary Program presented on the History, Mission, Program Structure, plan, and partnerships of the PPBEP. The PPBEP is funded by \$2 million from RESTORE and EPA. PPBEP is a coalition of local, state, and federal stakeholders from two states, four counties and five municipalities. The Policy Board is the final decision-making body and is comprised of representatives from the City of Orange Beach, the City of Pensacola, the City of Gulf Breeze, the City of Milton, the Town of Century, and Baldwin, Escambia, Santa Rosa, and Okaloosa counties. The Policy Board is supported by program staff and three committees- Technical, Education & Outreach, and Business Partnership.

Rich Innes, Senior Policy Director of the Association of National Estuary Programs presented on ANEP: The Protect and Restore America's Estuaries Act, with strong bipartisan support in the House and unanimous approval from the Senate, was signed into law on January 13, 2021. The Act reaffirms support for the work of the National Estuary Program, and nearly doubles the annual funding limit to \$50 million. Under the new law, each NEP could receive as much as \$1 million each year.

In 1987, the U.S. Congress amended the Clean Water Act by establishing the National Estuary Program (NEP) via Section 320 of the 1987 Clean Water Act (CWA) to identify, protect and restore "estuaries of national significance." Section 320 enabled states, upon federal approval, to establish a management conference to develop a comprehensive management plan for estuaries that were deemed to be threatened by pollution, development, or overuse, through collaborative voluntary efforts of federal, state, local, non-profit, and private interests.

The ANEP policy on adding NEPs to the program is to do so with no overlap in boundaries.

4. Director's Report

- a) Center of Excellence Relevancy Review: Alabama's Center of Excellence will build upon the network of experts from the MESG, MBNEP, and MASGC and will implement a competitive grant program that awards \$4.5 million in RESTORE Act funds to academic institutions in Alabama to perform cutting edge, forward-looking, scientific research over the next 3 years. Data and information generated by the Center of Excellence funded research will help provide science-driven solutions and recommendations for current and future conditions in coastal Alabama.
- b) EPA Quality Management Plan: An EPA requirement for funding, the purpose is to document the overall policy, scope, applicability, and management responsibilities of the quality system. It establishes standard procedures and any other technical data that might be required to describe data management plans at the DISL.
- c) External Grants: We have received a \$50,000 grant from Alabama Power to establish a revolving loan fund to support local fisheries' livelihoods. We have applied for a \$5,000,000 NFWF-NCRF grant for the Deer River Marsh Creation and Shoreline Stabilization construction project. We have also applied for a \$499,915 EPA GOMP grant to create a competition and implement winning design for comprehensive green infrastructure installations in the Dog River, Three Mile Creek, Eastern Shore and Bon Secour watersheds.
- d) Watershed Tours: We gave several tours in June and July to local Mayors, municipality staff, Congressmen, and County Commissioners. We have pretty much perfected our D'Olive tour for anyone who wants to see the projects. PIC members toured Lightning Point and Bayfront Park.
- e) Dauphin Island Fiscal Impact Analysis: An analysis of taxes generated versus cost of services on Dauphin Island
- f) Special Events: Creekfest was held June 12
- g) Social Media: Our social media reach has increased 1,000% this past quarter and our followers have nearly doubled the past two quarters.

5. Committee Reports (MBNEP Management Conference Co-Chairs)

Science Advisory Committee

Dr. Amy Hunter reported on the SAC. Owing to many scheduling conflicts, field seasons, and a desire to work with sub-committees, the SAC did not hold a summer meeting. The next SAC meeting will be held October 8. Co-chairs and other members of SAC met as a sub-committee to discuss the development of an indicator workshop similar to that held in 2005. Determined workshop not necessarily needed but will continue to work to determine best indicators to tell the story of the State-of-the-Bay. Soliciting SAC members to complete an updated version of the 2012 Stressor Matrix Evaluation that was used to help guide the 2013 CCMP priorities. Comparisons will be made with 2012 results to inform the potential update/extension of the current CCMP.

Project Implementation Committee

Judy Haner and Patric Harper discussed the PIC. The committee held their first off-cycle topical meeting; participants visited two shoreline projects to discuss lessons learned, design concepts, and permitting/monitoring, etc. Lightning Point (post-restoration) and Bayfront Park/DI Causeway (pre-restoration). The next PIC meeting will be September 30, 2021 and will have speakers sharing invasive species management content and activities.

Next, MBNEP staff Christian Miller and Jason Kudulis gave updates on restoration activities. Christian gave a quick update on watershed planning. The Western Shore WMP draft has been released for comment and will be finalized by the end of September. The Gulf Frontal WMP is under internal review and the D'Olive WMP Update scheduled to be completed by the end of October, as well as the Gulf Frontal WMP. Further watershed baseline/sediment work was not needed for the Western Delta watersheds. The Mobile Tensaw-Apalachee and Eastern Shore Plans are in progress and scheduled for completion by the end of the

year/beginning of next year. The Dauphin Island WMP should be complete by April 2022. The next Plans to be released via RFQ will be Lower Chasaw, likely as a stand-alone, and the other Western Delta watersheds grouped into one complex. Sediment/baseline analysis work is getting underway on the Eastern Delta complex. RFQ for The Eastern Shore WMP to be released later in the year. Additional monitoring work is going on in Gulf Frontal and potentially Lower Chasaw (pathogens).

The 12 Mile Creek stream channel construction is substantially complete, with planting to start in the late fall/early winter. A vegetation monitoring protocol is being finalized. Invasive species management is underway at Langan Park with apple snail eradication. Osprey Initiative is removing eggs and adults twice a week and American Sportfish is applying herbicide and molluscicide treatments.

The Deer River marsh restoration goals are to protect up to 5,600 feet of shoreline and create at least 30 acres of salt marsh and to enhance over 275 acres of existing priority tidal creek marsh complex habitat. A film was shown about this restoration project.

Field assessments of targeted subwatersheds in lower Fish River have been completed. Results found some sediment and nutrient issues but not on the scale or magnitude of D'Olive or similar stream projects. The project team is coordinating with partners to evaluate identified issues and consider additional assessments in other nearby subwatersheds. The Marlow restoration E & D is complete to 30% design and we are working with landowners to secure construction access.

Government Networks Committee

Christian Miller presented on the GNC, who's next meeting will be in late September/early October. John Carlton is nearing completion of the South Alabama Stormwater Regulatory Review, which will include trash/litter/recycling regulations. In planning for the next GNC meeting, the group will focus on litter, including the SB 107 bill that was passed.

Community Action Committee

Leslie Gahagan reported on the CAC meeting from July 12, 2021, which continues to have better participation with the virtual meetings. With multiple watershed plans under development and with having had quite a few new members join the CAC recently through volunteer monitoring, the CAC took the opportunity to educate the group on why citizen involvement is so important throughout the watershed planning process, and, using the Three Mile Creek WMP as example, shared some of the transformative projects and other community improvements that have been implemented because of community suggestions. During the meeting, a conversation sparked about who should be the ones pushing the watershed plans forward once they've been published and MBNEP has begun developing the next WMP. This revealed the need to create some momentum within certain Grassroots groups. This will be addressed at a future CAC meeting. Another topic was the development of a reporting protocol for alerting ADEM to data-based water quality issues since extremely high levels of E.coli are being recorded at different sites in Fowl and West Fowl River. The protocol is currently in development and is being vetted by ADEM's Water Quality Branch. A map of suggested volunteer water quality monitoring sites and sites currently being monitored was shown. The goal is to match volunteers with all the suggested sites.

Business Resources Committee

Frank Smith reported on The Coastal Alabama Fisheries Fund, microloan fund and suite of supporting services the MBNEP is creating to support oyster aquaculture in our region, with the intent to eventually expand to other fisheries. Since last quarter we've been awarded and received a \$50,000 grant from Alabama Power to create a pilot program for the loan fund. We've completed an RFP process to identify a financial partner and have accepted 22nd State Bank's proposal. We are working to complete final terms with them and will soon after be able to issue our first loan. In the meantime, we are building a steering committee to launch and help manage the fund. The committee will be responsible for reviewing loan applications, arranging auxiliary services for the farmers, and growing the fund. The vision is to eventually hand over

responsibility and management of the fund to the oyster farmers themselves, to have a true peer-lending program, and the steering committee will work to make that happen as well.

Eliska Morgan reported on a new website for local oyster farmers, *OystersAlabama.com*. The BRC was approached by oyster farmers last year who asked for help marketing their oysters. The issue presented was that Alabama oysters didn't have much of a reputation. After research and interviews, we discovered that southern oysters in general don't have a stellar reputation outside of the south, and more so that many small farmers, which is most of our farmers, had a hard time developing their brand even locally. Some of this was due to a general lack of marketing knowhow, some of it was due to underdeveloped relationships with restaurants and distributors, and some of it was from the lack of time or resources to really get out there and promote themselves. We began developing a marketing plan to help promote the southern oyster and our local farms. Some of this work was already being done by organizations such as Oyster South, who are working diligently to increase the profile of the southern oyster in general, or the Auburn Shellfish Lab, who are doing so much to provide support for technical needs of farmers, and even Eat Alabama Seafood, which is terrific resource for learning about gulf seafood but lacks the laser focus we need. In terms of really niche marketing support that is focused on Alabama oysters specifically, we found a gap. The first need of any marketing campaign we could think of was an online platform for the farmers to specifically sell themselves, so we built *OystersAlabama.com*. This website currently hosts profiles for Alabama oyster farmers where they have provided blurbs and other info for consumers or distributors. If you want to buy oysters, the site directs you to current distributors of these oysters or to contact the farmer to see when they are available. However, longer term the vision is to be able to purchase oysters off of this website.

Community Resources Committee

Walter Ernest reported on the CRC. Overall, members have not been engaged in this committee, or shown any interest in filling the open spot for the other co-chair. The active CRC members already sit on other management conference committees and have no objections to letting go of the Community Resources Committee. Walter made a motion to dissolve the CRC. Jennifer Denson seconded the motion. Hearing no opposition, the motion passed.

Finance Committee

Jennifer Denson reported on the FC meeting from June 10, 2021. The committee encouraged MBNEP to increase municipal funding requests and add additional municipalities. We have received confirmation from several communities for the increased funding and presented at new City Council meetings- Saraland, Satsuma, and Chicaksaw. We've had outstanding support with these new requests.

6. Old Business

7. New Business

8. Other / Announcements

The meeting adjourned at 11:44 a.m.