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Leveraging Alabama's Natural Resources to Promote Growing Roots in Alabama

By CHRIS BLANKENSHIP, COMMISSIONER, ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND NATURAL RESOURCES

Innovate Alabama is Alabama's first statewide public-private partnership focused on entrepreneurship, technology, and innovation. With a mission to help innovators grow roots in Alabama, founding CEO Cynthia Crutchfield is leading the charge of Innovate Alabama, which fosters an environment for entrepreneurship to thrive in every corner of our state. *Cont. on pg. 3*

- 1 Leveraging Alabama's Natural Resources to Promote Growing Roots in Alabama
- 2 ACAMP in Action: Boosting the Economy by Protecting Natural Resources on the Coast
- 4 Keep Calm and Plan On: Natural Resources Management is Key to Resilient Communities
- 5 Working Together: Local Officials Coordinating Efforts to Advance Natural Resource Management
- 6 Continuous Improvement of Natural Resource Management Demands Inclusion of Local Voices
- 7 Turning a 10,000-Foot View into a 30,000-Foot Picture: Environmental Priorities Across the Coast

- 9 Protecting Dauphin Island and the Coast: A Dune Ordinance for the State's First Line of Defense
- 10 Protection in Every Community: How ACAMP Funds Are Bringing New Attention to Beulah Heights
- 11 Mindful Watershed Management: D'Olive Watershed Regulatory Changes Getting It Done At Home: Why Local Governments Are Best Suited to Balance Growth and the Conservation of Alabama's Coastal Resources
- 12

- 13 A Look to the Future: New Opportunities For Improving Local Natural Resource Management
- 14 Natural Resources as a Means to Grow Our Ecotourism Economy: A Partnership for Preservation and Promotion
- 16 MBNEP Executive Committee Welcomes New Members

Currently Inside



Coastal Corner

By WILL UNDERWOOD, COASTAL SECTION ADMINISTRATOR,
ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND
NATURAL RESOURCES, STATE LANDS DIVISION

ACAMP in Action: *Boosting the Economy by Protecting Natural Resources on the Coast*

Photo by Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

There is an adage that the best time to plant a tree was 30 years ago, and the second-best time is today. I believe we could apply the same philosophy to our responsibilities in planning for and supporting the unprecedented growth currently being experienced in Coastal Alabama. In this issue of the *Current Connection*, we highlight the role of the Alabama Coastal Area

Management Program (ACAMP) in providing technical assistance, training, and funding to support local government planning, which is vital to providing a roadmap for what the coast will become moving forward.

Now in its 44th year, ACAMP has supported approximately 19 communities developing comprehensive plans, providing pass-through federal funds that allow local governments to map and plan for critical infrastructure, evaluate risk

exposure, and develop a land-use vision driven by stakeholder engagement.

I hope you enjoy reading some of the local success stories shared here, including the Town of Dauphin Island's journey towards sustainable dune management, iterative comprehensive planning for the City of Foley, and the long-term collaboration of ACAMP with the South Alabama Regional Planning Commission in supporting local governments with planning efforts.

Leveraging Alabama's Natural Resources to Promote Growing Roots in Alabama *Cont. from page 1*

From being the crucible for the invention of windshield wipers to becoming a leader in aerospace and biomedical research to revolutionizing how essential items get delivered to doorsteps, Alabama has a rich tradition of innovation. Through forward-thinking policies and programs, Innovate Alabama is working to further enhance and support the State's collaborative, vibrant innovation ecosystem. We want today's entrepreneurs and innovators to find a desirable cost of living, a business-friendly climate, and a supportive environment to grow, work, learn, and play here with us in Alabama.

Governor Ivey established Innovate Alabama's predecessor, the Alabama Innovation Commission, to determine how to grow the tech sector and our economy in Alabama. The Innovate Alabama Commission developed a comprehensive report to serve as a blueprint for its mission. This report contains key recommendations and strategies Innovate Alabama has adopted, such as increasing access to capital, attracting and retaining talent, and **positioning Alabama's outdoor recreation and lifestyle assets as economic drivers.**

In addition to increasing the quality of life for millions of Americans, outdoor recreation is one of the nation's largest economic drivers. According to the Outdoor Industry Association, American consumers spend more per year on outdoor recreation than on pharmaceuticals and fuel combined. In Alabama, outdoor-related activities generate an economic impact of almost \$15 billion annually. This translates to more than 135,000 jobs for Alabamians.

Given the size of the economic impact, the Alabama Innovation Commission found that a more robust outdoor infrastructure has the potential to make the State a premier tourism destination while attracting and keeping the skilled workforce necessary to stay competitive globally.



THE COUNCIL ON OUTDOOR RECREATION

In 2021, Innovate Alabama joined forces with Alabama native Condoleezza Rice and Stanford University's Hoover Institution to conduct extensive research to help us "grow smart." A primary takeaway from this research was the opportunity to leverage Alabama's natural resources to draw innovators to put down roots here, leading the Innovate Alabama board of directors to create a Council on Outdoor Recreation in August of 2022. I have the privilege of serving as the chairman of the Outdoor Recreation Council.

Innovate Alabama's Council on Outdoor Recreation seeks to expand, promote, and protect Alabama's outdoor recreational assets for the enjoyment of current and future Alabama citizens and to provide recommendations for using those assets as innovative economic development tools.

Charged with developing a strategic path forward aligned with three main objectives – expand Alabama's outdoor recreation industry, enhance the State's attractiveness for a skilled workforce, and yield substantial returns for rural and urban communities – the council and its advisory roundtable developed 13 key recommendations to support Innovate Alabama's mission.

Key Recommendations:

1. Build a comprehensive, regularly updated inventory of all Alabama outdoor recreation assets.
2. Create a website that's a central hub for all outdoor recreation assets in Alabama.
3. Develop a comprehensive, long-term outdoor recreation asset-branding, marketing, and advertising plan for the state of Alabama.
4. Establish a permanent Council on Outdoor Recreation within Innovate Alabama.
5. Hire staff and establish programs within Innovate Alabama that are focused on and dedicated to promoting outdoor recreation.
6. Identify ways to cooperate with other states, cities, and organizations to boost awareness about our Alabama outdoor recreation assets.

7. Organize and host an annual Alabama outdoor recreation summit/conference.
8. Develop a comprehensive, competitive analysis of what other similar states are doing well and a plan for replicating or improving on their successes in utilizing outdoor recreation assets to retain and attract talent.
9. Leverage existing studies to guide planning and implementation efforts.
10. Bolster economic development recruitment efforts by ensuring that economic development partners have marketing assets to use in touting Alabama's outdoor recreation resources in their pitches to both in-State and out-of-State businesses and entrepreneurs.
11. Identify large, high-profile, high-impact development opportunities and actively recruit developers for those specific projects, possibly offering tailored economic incentives or tax credits.
12. Advocate for long-term, dedicated, sustainable funding in State budgets for maintaining, enhancing, and coordinating the promotion of outdoor recreation assets.
13. Engage with State government agencies to improve and streamline the process for obtaining existing outdoor recreation funds.

With these recently identified recommendations, Innovate Alabama is expanding its scope and focus on outdoor recreation. We have already engaged a marketing firm to assemble the outdoor recreation asset inventory, create a website, create an Alabama Outdoor Recreation brand, and develop a wide-scale marketing campaign. We have established a permanent Council on Outdoor Recreation. Innovate Alabama is in the process of hiring a full-time Outdoor Recreation Coordinator.

At our next Outdoor Recreation Council meeting, we will start planning an Outdoor Recreation Summit for 2024 and assemble the elements of a multi-million-dollar grant program we will administer. I look forward to sharing more information about this work in the next *Current Connection*.

Keep Calm and Plan On:

Natural Resource Management is Key to Resilient Communities

BY NICOLE TAYLOR, PLANNER/GIS SPECIALIST, SOUTH ALABAMA REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION

Smart growth means not only ensuring that what we love most about our coastal environment is here for generations to come, but also utilizing natural defenses to protect our communities when times get tough.

Balancing economic development while ensuring the preservation of Alabama's coastal resources and sensitive ecosystems has always been a challenge in Mobile and Baldwin counties. The challenge continues to grow with the rapid population and economic growth our region has experienced over the last decade.

With 25 municipalities and a combined population of more than 646,500, protecting the coastal zone areas and adjacent lands that directly impact these areas has been the focus of the Alabama Coastal Area Management Program (ACAMP) for more than 40 years.

Successful community development strives to balance the needs of conserving valuable resources while promoting and supporting growth. The ACAMP Planning Grant has helped numerous communities in our region achieve this arduous task by funding the development of local government planning and regulatory activities, educational outreach materials, coastal cleanups, and construction projects to improve public access to our local waterways.

The South Alabama Regional Planning Commission (SARPC) Community and Economic Development Department provides governmental planning services to municipalities within the coastal zone. This includes assistance with the development of long-range plans and regulatory documents that promote and improve the management of natural, cultural, and historical resources while fostering economic growth and development. The ACAMP's Planning

Grant has supported countless projects within SARPC's region, enhancing and improving the management of natural and historical resources across both counties.

These projects have increased the resiliency and sustainability of our communities and economies and have equipped our member governments to be better stewards of our region's diverse resources. Since the ACAMP Planning Grant's inception, SARPC has partnered with dozens of communities for more than four decades to develop better planning documents, community projects, and resources that support ACAMP's initiatives. The Planning Grant provides an invaluable resource to SARPC's coastal member governments that otherwise would not exist, allowing them to create better communities for their citizens.

Comprehensive plans are a community's 10- to 20-year vision for its future. They describe who communities are, their assets and challenges, growth projections, priorities in preservation of natural resources, and strategies for accomplishing future goals. Comprehensive plans guide future policy and create regulations, including zoning ordinances, subdivision regulations, overlay districts, historic preservation, and design guidelines. SARPC partners with municipalities and uses ACAMP funds to research, write, and develop comprehensive plans, with public engagement, using our experienced staff of community and transportation planners and GIS specialists. Over the years, SARPC has used ACAMP's Planning Grant assistance to develop and update comprehensive plans for the Town of Dauphin Island, City of Bayou La Batre, City of Semmes, City of Creola, City of Satsuma, Town of Mount Vernon, City of Citronelle, City of Chickasaw, City of Bay Minette, Town of Perdido Beach, and the Town of Summerdale. We are excited to start two new projects this year in the City of Robertsedale and Town of Magnolia Springs.

With our staff assistance, SARPC has also used ACAMP Planning Grant funding to develop and update zoning ordinances, subdivision regulations, overlay districts, and other policy documents for communities within the coastal zone. Some of these plans include the Gulf Shores Wetland Ordinance, Dauphin Island's Zoning Ordinance, Dune Protection Plan and Sensitive Habitat Plan, and zoning ordinances for the cities of Creola, Chickasaw, and Citronelle.

Another example of the benefits of the ACAMP Planning Grant on SARPC's member governments is the development of educational outreach materials. The Town of Dauphin Island is a thriving tourist destination with more than 800 vacation rental units. The Island is home to many sensitive ecosystems, including sand dunes, turtle nesting, tide pools, maritime forests, wetlands, bird sanctuaries, and flood plains. The Island welcomes thousands of tourists each year, and because of this, residents and property owners wanted a way to educate visitors about their coastal resources. With the assistance of SARPC and ACAMP's Planning Grant, the Town of Dauphin Island developed educational brochures that identify these sensitive ecosystems on the island and how visitors can enjoy and protect them. These brochures are supplied to all rental agencies across the Island to place in rental properties and at the welcome center. These resources help the Town and its citizenry conserve the island's diversity and ecology while sharing their resources with people from other parts of our country.

With all this positive impact on our coastal zone, SARPC is grateful for this funding opportunity provided by NOAA and ADCNR – State Lands Division, their ACAMP Planning Grant, and all their efforts and looks forward to partnering with them to serve our member governments for many more years to come.

Working Together:

Local Officials Coordinating Efforts to Advance Natural Resource Management

BY CHRISTIAN MILLER, PUBLIC SECTOR PROGRAM LEAD, MOBILE BAY NATIONAL ESTUARY PROGRAM

The Mobile Bay National Estuary Program's Government Networks Committee (GNC), led by Mobile and Baldwin County Commissioners Merceria Ludgood and Billie Jo Underwood, was established to bring State agency directors, regional government administrators, and local elected officials of Mobile and Baldwin counties together to share about the challenges facing our coastal communities while also providing Alabama agencies an opportunity to inform these officials about State priorities and objectives.

The GNC plays a pivotal role in fostering a cooperative environment where federal, State, and local governments can address local issues together. This is accomplished through partnering in implementing coastal watershed management plans, establishing, and supporting cooperative watershed partnerships, improving the regulatory framework to improve stormwater management and protect natural resources, and educating local officials and the public about changing climatic conditions and sea level rise.

One of the efforts supported by the GNC was creating and updating the South Alabama Regulatory Review. First completed in 2018, this document represents a comprehensive review of existing laws, regulations, permits, and ordinances at the federal, State, and local levels for the two coastal counties. Approximately 50 county and municipal government regulations were reviewed regarding factors influencing stormwater management, water quality, wetland,

stream and shoreline protection, and low-impact development. In 2021, it was updated to include regulations about littering and recycling.

Serving as a guide for municipal resource managers to use to update their own rules to enhance natural resource protections, the review tracks regulatory improvements over time and provides local communities with valuable information related to model ordinances and regulations. According to Ashley Campbell, a natural resources planner with Baldwin County, "With the recent Supreme Court decision (*Sackett v. EPA*), it will be more important for local municipalities and counties to enhance their regulations to not only protect water quality and ecosystems but protect from downstream flooding."

Another example of the GNC's efforts over the past five years is the passage of a Statewide litter bill to increase fines and enforcement ability to mitigate littering. Sponsored by Representative Margie Wilcox of Mobile and vetted through the GNC, the bill targeted littering from vehicles and watercraft, increasing penalties and fines and making enforcement easier for local authorities.

After attending Mobile community meetings regarding litter-impacted rivers, streams, and the Gulf and reading the previous law, Representative Wilcox mused, "I felt like the fines for some of these offenses were horribly inadequate. An important thing from my discussions with the public was they wanted people punished by making them pick up the



Photo by Mobile Bay National Estuary Program

litter. That was my favorite part of the bill." Not surprisingly, Representative Wilcox highlights how the bill, now a law, requires second-time offenders to engage in litter pickup; it reinforces the urgency that people need to pick up their own litter. Representative Wilcox's collaboration with the GNC showcases the winning combination of cooperative municipal environments in addressing persistent local concerns.

Reflecting on the GNC's dynamic role, I continue to be impressed by the various ways in which the GNC helps build the capacity of local governments to manage and enhance coastal environmental resources. Whether through learning and sharing best practices, changing Statewide laws, or coming together to set a share vision for local environmental management, the GNC's milestones require collaboration from many local governments, State agencies, and various community partners.

Continuous Improvement of Natural Resource Management Demands Inclusion of Local Voices

Photo by Bekah Farmer,
Mobile Bay National Estuary Program

In the aftermath of World War II, Japan introduced the philosophy of Total Quality Management (TQM), a holistic approach to long-term success through customer satisfaction. Crafted by a committee of scholars, engineers, and government officials, TQM aimed to boost Japanese productivity and enhance post-war quality of life. While TQM implementation has evolved, its fundamental tenets persist, offering valuable insights for improving how we manage environmental resources.

According to the American Society for Quality, TQM is a management approach that seeks enduring success through customer satisfaction. It involves the active participation of all members of an organization in improving processes, products, services, and the overall workplace culture to produce high-quality products that meet customers' needs. The emphasis is on continuous improvement and the pursuit of excellence in part by incorporating input from those closest to the production line.

Bringing the wisdom of this model to environmental stewardship, the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program Management Conference follows a similar path. The spirit of the National Estuary Program is grounded in the notion that those closest to the resource

understand best how to manage it. Guided, therefore, by what coastal residents value about their surrounding environments, our work is now focused on rewriting the *Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan* (CCMP) for Alabama's Estuaries and Coast for the third time since 2002. This plan is a critical tool for guiding sustainable development and conservation efforts.

The first step in this process is one of careful evaluation to ensure the CCMP celebrates the strengths, addresses the weaknesses, capitalizes on the opportunities, and is mindful of the threats to coastal assets. This approach mirrors the essence of TQM, where a meticulous analysis of existing conditions informs the improvement process.

Imagine the CCMP as a collaborative composition where the voices of the community harmonize with the principles of TQM. Just as TQM calls for the active participation of all members in an organization, community engagement is the cornerstone of effective environmental governance. Residents of our coastal counties are not mere spectators but active contributors to the vision. Community engagement ensures a CCMP that reflects the values and priorities of those directly impacted by coastal management decisions. It will transform stakeholders from passive recipients of environmental policies to active participants in shaping the future of their surroundings. The CCMP will become the score sheet for this symphony,


detailing the harmony of our actions needed to sustain the region's ecological health.

In the pursuit of sustainability, the vision extends beyond TQM to embrace the spirit of Collective Impact. This envisions a network of governmental bodies, environmental agencies, and diverse stakeholders converging as a rich ecosystem creating a shared commitment to achieving sustainable, robust, resilient communities.

In this symphony of coordination, TQM and Collective Impact partner to ensure environmental policies and actions are effective and contribute to a broader vision of planetary health. TQM instills a disciplined approach to eco-governance, while Collective Impact transforms individual initiatives into a harmonious orchestration of shared environmental successes.

The result is a thriving environmental governance community, where each agency and stakeholder is not just a contributor but an integral part of a united front for the planet's well-being. It's a celebration of unity, a testament to the belief that together, we can compose a future that harmonizes with the needs of both people and the environment.

As our collaborative efforts continue, may the harmony of our work inspire us all toward a future where the well-being of coastal Alabama is a shared responsibility and a proud, collective achievement.



Turning a 10,000-Foot View into a 30,000-Foot Picture: *Environmental Priorities Across the Coast*

Dog River, Photo by Bekah Farmer, Mobile Bay National Estuary Program

By CHRIS WARN, VICE PRESIDENT, ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATES

In 2013, the Mobile National Estuary Program (MBNEP) embarked upon a holistic, watershed-based approach to guide coastal ecosystem restoration and protection measures. The MBNEP's Ecosystem Restoration and Protection strategy of the *Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP)* initiated this approach by employing a watershed management planning and implementation methodology

to aid the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) in meeting water quality standards for coastal streams.

The watershed management plans' (WMPs) focus on drainage areas, not political jurisdictions, establishes cross boundary partnerships between governments to ensure freshwater entering Alabama's estuaries is high quality. These WMPs focus on coastal waters successfully meeting ADEM's use classifications and restoration projects are scientifically defensible and components

of an overall environmental management program at the local level. The MBNEP's purpose is "to bring together an engaged and diverse community committed to integrating environmental health with community development by identifying ecosystem priorities, how to achieve them, and how to facilitate their implementation."

Watershed planning brings local communities together to learn about their surrounding environment and engage them in prioritizing environmental goals and developing action plans to achieve them.

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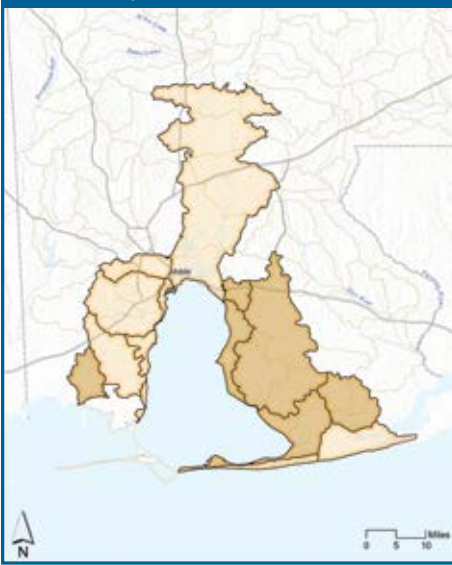
Turning a 10,000-Foot View into a 30,000-Foot Picture Continued from page 7

In preparing for the next CCMP, the MBNEP has compiled information from WMPs completed to date in a comprehensive watershed assessment document. The *Synthesizing Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans Across the Alabama Coast* report is intended to guide future MBNEP development in response to the common needs and recommendations identified across the already completed

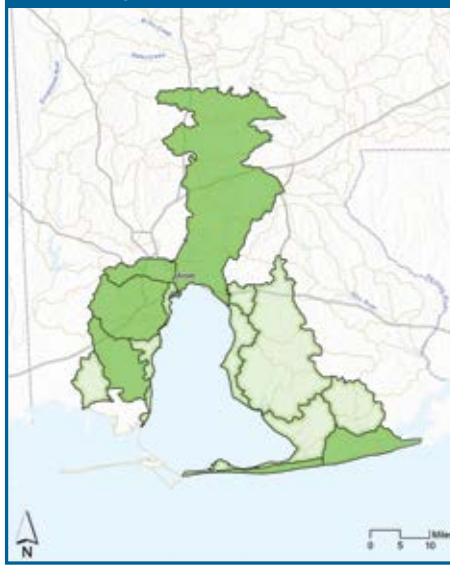
WMPs. The document will improve how the MBNEP and collaborators deliver services when implementing plan recommendations, improve prioritization of investments across all watersheds to address the most significant needs, and increase the leverage of funds available for implementation by providing a strategic road map for improving environmental conditions across the Alabama coast.

By compiling the information on the MBNEP Watershed Management Plans completed to date, the document will be foundational to the development of the next CCMP. It will also clarify what types of programs will best support resource managers, policymakers, community organizations, and citizens in improving the management and conservation of environmental assets.

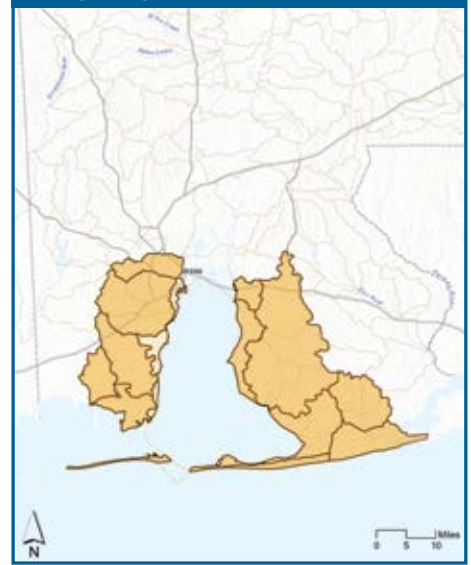
Sediment Impaired Watersheds Source: MBNEP



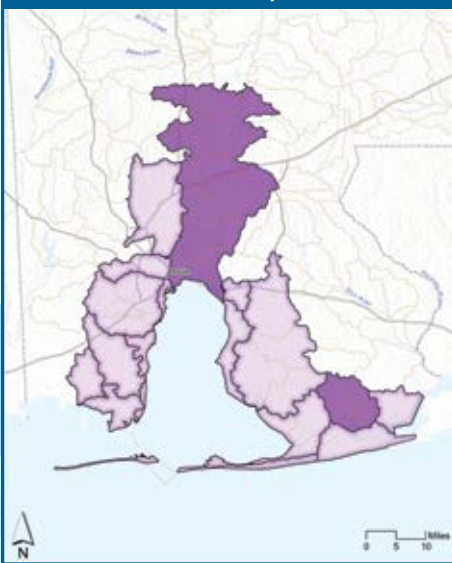
Nutrient Impaired Watersheds Source: MBNEP



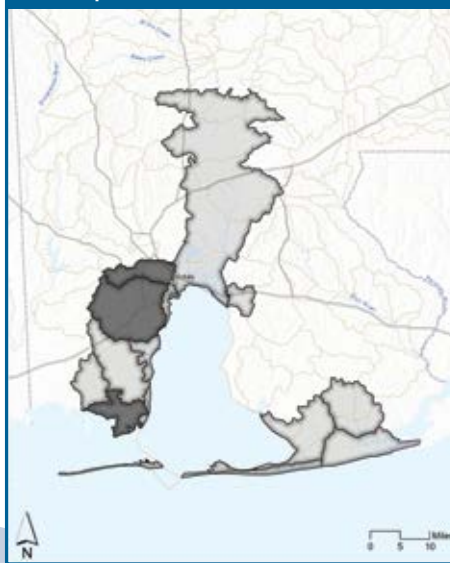
Pathogen Impaired Watersheds Source: MBNEP



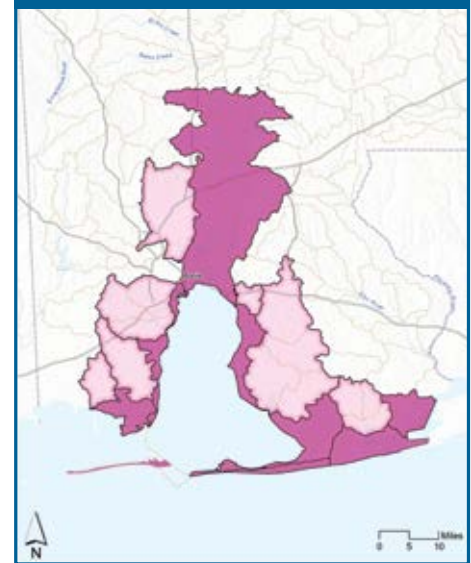
Watersheds with Invasive Species Source: MBNEP



Litter Impaired Watersheds Source: MBNEP



Watersheds with Shoreline Erosion Source: MBNEP



Protecting Dauphin Island and the Coast: *A Dune Ordinance for the State's First Line of Defense*

By JEFF COLLIER, MAYOR, TOWN OF DAUPHIN ISLAND

When I was growing up as a child on Dauphin Island, my family impressed upon me the importance of the giant sand dunes that meandered along the south side of this barrier island – and what would happen to me if I was ever caught playing on them. Let's just say sitting wouldn't be very comfortable for at least a day or so. Although nearly 60 years have passed since those meaningful messages were relayed to that little boy who has now served as the Island's Mayor for more than 25 years, the need for dune and broader environmental protection is even more imperative today.

Like most other coastal communities, Dauphin Island has seen an explosion of growth over the past decade. During this time, Dauphin Island has experienced a nearly 40% increase in full-time resident population, more than 500 new homes constructed, and a noticeable jump in tourism. While these statistics reflect positively on the Town's budget and balance sheets, they also create challenges as we work to ensure environmental sustainability amid an ever-changing landscape. To that end, the Town has taken aggressive actions to not only adopt a Dune Protection Overlay District, but also, in recent years, to create its own Tree Ordinance and Wetland Ordinance, which further demonstrate Dauphin Island's commitment to maintaining a healthy environment.

As our community grappled with impacts of growth and the need to be especially mindful that the management of natural, cultural, and historical resources



was a high priority, the Alabama Coastal Area Management Program (ACAMP) proved quite beneficial. Developing such regulations that reflect our community's needs required extensive research and careful crafting of ordinances. Balancing a sustainable environment, private property rights, and economic stability was a significant challenge. These efforts demanded time, research, and resources to achieve our goals. Fortunately, our experiences in this arena have been quite successful.

As a barrier island, Dauphin Island finds itself at the proverbial "tip of the spear" when tropical storms threaten our stretch of the Gulf Coast. The *Deepwater Horizon* disaster of 2010 reminded us that our region is susceptible to various threats that can sometimes occur with little warning. Dunes protect from damaging winds and storm surges, serving as the island's spine for centuries. As development continued to inch closer into these dune fields, best management practices were incorporated within the Dune Protection Overlay District guidelines. While that action allowed for properties to be developed in these sensitive areas, it also required it to be done responsibly and in a manner with the fewest adverse impacts.

Similarly, the creation of the Tree Ordinance and Wetland Ordinance limited the detrimental effects that would likely have occurred through the unnecessary loss of trees and filling of wetlands. These natural resources benefit the built environment and provide a critically important habitat for a variety of birds and other creatures that call Dauphin Island home. For these and other reasons, we can never forget the valuable roles our natural environment plays and why it's extremely important to maintain a healthy and vibrant environment for future generations.

Recognizing that a healthy natural environment is intrinsically tied to an overall healthy economy and enhanced quality of life is crucial. Doing something about it takes foresight and a willingness to roll up our sleeves to make it happen. ACAMP provides funding and other valuable resources that help communities bridge gaps and related hurdles that might otherwise cause similar efforts to fail. There's no doubt that ACAMP's generous partnership with our barrier island community was the catalyst that helped us achieve the success we envisioned from the start. For that, the Town of Dauphin Island will be forever grateful.

Protection in Every Community:

How ACAMP Funds are Bringing New Attention to Beulah Heights

By AUBREY BLANCO, NATURAL RESOURCES PLANNER, ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES, STATE LANDS DIVISION

Coastal Alabama residents are well acquainted with scorching and rain-laden summers, where an average annual rainfall of 64 inches is the norm. The months of June, July, and August are the rainiest, exacerbated by storm surges and tropical events. This climatic cocktail, combined with rising sea levels, poses a significant flooding risk, particularly for communities in the coastal zone like Foley.

In response to these environmental challenges and with a vision to bolster resilience among its 25,000 residents, Foley has taken an innovative approach. The City integrates land preservation, watershed restoration, and other strategies to enhance the functionality of surrounding natural systems. In October of 2020, Foley secured Alabama Coastal Area Management Program (ACAMP) funding to craft a Coastal Flood Response Plan. This plan encompasses various actions and flood response strategies, including public education, a flood warning system, and short-term and long-term recovery plans.

Building on this initiative, Foley recently received additional ACAMP funding to extend the Coastal Flood Response Plan to Beulah Heights. Situated south of Highway 98 and bordered by Highway 59 and the Foley Beach Expressway, Beulah Heights



contends with periodic flooding from Wolf Creek, which runs through the community. Even beyond the floodplain, rain events often cause flooding, worsened by clogged drainage ways, saturated conditions, and inadequate stormwater systems. The consequences range from road washouts to home flooding, and even disturbances in the Beulah Heights community cemetery, unearthing coffins and devastating families and friends.

Engaging Thompson Engineering for assistance, Foley organized public meetings to understand stormwater and flooding concerns, including issues with septic tanks. This collaborative knowledge-sharing led to the development of the *Beulah Heights*

Stormwater Management Plan. Completed in September of 2023, the plan identifies priority measures to address flooding concerns and strategies to adapt the community to environmental stressors. Key priorities include the maintenance and modification of the Michigan Street Regional Stormwater Facility, along with projects involving ditches, pipes, culverts, and drainage inlets.

While planning is crucial, successful adaptation hinges on effective implementation. The City of Foley is set to kick off the implementation of the *Beulah Heights Stormwater Management Plan* measures in 2024, ushering in a new era of resilience for the community.



D'Olive Creek Watershed After Restoration
Photo by Mobile Bay National Estuary Program

Mindful Watershed Management: *D'Olive Watershed Regulatory Changes*

BY CHRISTIAN MILLER, PUBLIC SECTOR PROGRAM LEAD, MOBILE BAY NATIONAL ESTUARY PROGRAM

Often, environmental restoration focuses on on-the-ground projects that provide visible and tangible results, with little thought given to conditions giving rise to the situation. To ensure the long-term success of these restorations and, more importantly, to improve the underlying variables that led to degraded streams and wetlands in the first place, a comprehensive watershed approach including restoration and regulatory improvements is demonstrating success across the Alabama Coast.

The D'Olive Watershed is a realized example of a comprehensive approach to watershed restoration. Published in 2010, the *D'Olive Creek, Tiarawasee Creek, and Joes Branch Watershed Management Plan* (WMP) reviewed all federal, State, and local regulations, identifying inconsistencies across jurisdictions and providing recommendations for improving management through modifications. The WMP included 24 recommendations, or updates, to regulations for development and stormwater management, focused on reducing inconsistencies, resolving deficiencies, improving wetland protection, and increasing enforcement.

Another recommendation from the WMP was for the City of Daphne, the

City of Spanish Fort, and Baldwin County to work together to address regulatory inconsistencies across the watershed. This has been accomplished by establishing the D'Olive Intergovernmental Task Force, which includes representatives from both cities, the County, and the Alabama Department of Environmental Management. This group has been instrumental in guiding comprehensive restoration throughout the Watershed, including the following:

- The City of Daphne amended its land use and development ordinance to include additional first flush treatment requirements to improve water quality in stormwater emanating from developed areas and added wetland and stream buffer requirements to protect these critical areas, preventing future stream and wetland degradation. The city also enacted a Low Impact Development (LID) Ordinance to allow for the use of LID practices. LID practices mimic natural hydrologic functions to reduce stormwater runoff, promote infiltration and groundwater recharge, and increase greenspaces.
- The City of Spanish Fort enacted a comprehensive "Clean Water Ordinance" in 2018 to significantly increase the City's ability to manage stormwater issues through enforcement. This ordinance also included

language to mitigate littering and illicit discharges and set required wetland and stream buffers for new construction.

- Baldwin County has worked to enhance the protection of natural resources by establishing wetland and stream buffers, implementing best practices for construction to reduce impacts from stormwater runoff, and creating "Good Neighbor" policies to eliminate downstream effects associated with developed areas.

"The D'Olive Watershed set the standard of how to best manage watersheds comprehensively," said Ashley Campbell, a natural resources planner with Baldwin County. "Since the first watershed plan was completed, we've worked hard to implement good ordinances to protect existing natural resources and worked with Mobile Bay National Estuary Program (MBNEP), the State, and other partners to restore impaired areas," she said. Although much work has been done to date, additional efforts to strengthen the regulatory environment in the D'Olive Watershed are ongoing. Impactful watershed management will require continued coordinated efforts among local government officials, State and federal agencies, MBNEP, and concerned citizens with an established model to build from in the D'Olive Watershed.

Getting It Done At Home:

Why Local Governments Are Best Suited to Balance Growth and the Conservation of Alabama's Coastal Resources

BY AUBREY BLANCO, NATURAL RESOURCES PLANNER, ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES, STATE LANDS DIVISION

It's no secret that many people love the coast – it's one of the many reasons why we have all chosen to make south Alabama home. With more people than ever visiting and moving to Mobile and Baldwin counties, it is imperative that agencies at all levels plan and prepare for rising population growth while simultaneously ensuring the protection of the irreplaceable natural resources that draw people to the coastal area.

The purpose of the Alabama Coastal Area Management Program (ACAMP), which was approved by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in 1979 as part of the National Coastal Zone Management (CZM) Program, is to balance economic growth and development with the need for conservation of Alabama's coastal resources. ACAMP partners with local governments and entities to promote informed management of coastal resources to foster long-term ecological and economic productivity of the Alabama coast.

ACAMP is administered as a networked CZM program in which the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR), State Lands Division, Coastal Section, holds primary responsibility for planning and policy development per State legislation and State Executive Order 43. The Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM), Field Operations Division, Mobile Office Branch holds responsibility for the permitting, monitoring, and enforcement functions of the enforceable policies of ACAMP,

consistent with the requirements and intent of the Legislature of the State of Alabama. These functions are codified in the ADEM Division 8 Coastal Program Regulations and include consistent review of projects and other activities subject to the enforceable policies of ACAMP, which the federal government does not regulate. These "non-regulated uses" include the withdrawal of groundwater, new commercial and residential developments, construction on Gulf-front beaches and dunes, energy facility operation, and new discharges to coastal waters.

To better manage the construction along Alabama's Gulf-front beaches, ADEM has delegated the authority to local governments to manage these activities in their respective communities. Cooperative agreements have been established between ADEM and the local governments along Alabama's coast, including the Town of Dauphin Island, the Baldwin County Commission, the City of Gulf Shores, and the City of Orange Beach. The program aims to help streamline the permitting process through coordination, implementation of inspection services, and monitoring of the Gulf of Mexico fronting beaches and dunes.

"Being delegated to manage the ACAMP for the unincorporated areas of Baldwin County has greatly benefited the citizens, especially when it comes to the permitting process for construction," says Janie Joiner, Hazard Mitigation Coordinator and Coastal Area Program Coordinator for the Baldwin County Building Department. "Since the construction permits are now managed locally, the time frame for processing them has become faster. This means that citizens can obtain the necessary permits for construction in a more efficient

manner." The delegated programs serve as the one point of contact for the public and hold responsibility for coordinating with the State and federal agencies. "We have a local office where citizens can visit or call to address their coastal-related issues and concerns," says Joiner. In addition to having a physical office, staff are at the beach daily, which helps with monitoring. This presence "ensures that any potential problems or hazards are identified and addressed promptly, further enhancing the overall safety and well-being of the citizens," she says.

"ADEM's local delegation to the City of Orange Beach has been a huge benefit to our community," says Nicole Woerner, the City of Orange Beach Coastal Resources Deputy Director. ADEM provides financial support and a technical advisor who works with these communities daily to ensure that regulations governing construction and other Gulf-fronting beach activities are consistently interpreted and applied across the jurisdictions. The technical advisor is readily available should obstacles arise while meeting regularly with local government staff members and participating in council and city, town, and county department head meetings.

"If we are ever confronted with a difficult situation, ADEM personnel are always a phone call away to discuss and give guidance," says Woerner. Through these immersive interactions, including the technical advisor's involvement in local working groups and task forces focused on coastal-related issues, the advisor can provide early input on projects and guide local governments towards approvable project designs, ultimately saving time and money.

A Look to the Future: New Opportunities for Improving Local Natural Resource Management

BY WILL UNDERWOOD, COASTAL SECTION ADMINISTRATOR, ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND NATURAL RESOURCES,
STATE LANDS DIVISION

The Alabama Coastal Area Management Program announces an annual request for proposals (RFP) for projects to be completed in the Alabama Coastal Area (defined as Mobile County and Baldwin County). The annual RFP application can be found at <https://www.outdooralabama.com/coastal-programs/alabama-coastal-area-management-program>. This competitive funding opportunity is administered by the Alabama Coastal Area Management Program (ACAMP) utilizing federal funds provided by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) under the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972. Applications are accepted for planning or public access projects that protect, enhance, and improve the management of natural, cultural, and historical coastal resources and increase coastal communities' sustainability, resiliency, and preparedness.

Planning project proposals (Section 306) must address coastal management issues related to at least one of the following focus areas: Government Coordination and Local Government Planning, Coastal Hazards and Resilient Communities, Coastal Habitats, Wetland Protection and Coastal Resource Stewardship, or Coastal Nonpoint Source Pollution Control. **Public Access project proposals (Section 306A)**, including land acquisition and low-cost construction, must focus on Public Access to Coastal Resources. These funds require a 1:1 ratio of non-federal matching funds by the subrecipient. The preferred minimum and maximum funding amounts are \$20,000 and \$50,000, respectively.



Over the past 20 years, from 2003 to 2023, more than 25 local municipalities and organizations have received over \$3.1 million in pass-through funds from ACAMP. Many municipalities have benefited from funding for staged projects, accomplished over several funding cycles, as well as spin-off projects developed as a result of ACAMP funding. Some of these returning applicants apply for projects separate from those previously awarded; however, there have been instances where municipalities have applied for funding year after year as the project was broken into phases or could be built upon once the planning stages were complete. For example, the City of Foley has applied for and received ACAMP funding to complete a multiphase comprehensive plan

by dividing the City into quadrants. The City applied for ACAMP funding for each quadrant during separate funding years, building upon and ultimately completing the city's comprehensive plan. The City followed up on this work with an ACAMP-funded City-wide stormwater plan and a coastal flood response plan.

The ACAMP request for proposals for the 2025 fiscal year was announced for February 5, 2024, with a deadline for proposal submission on Thursday, April 25, 2024, by 5 p.m. The notice, as well as the fillable application and guidance, is available on the Outdoor Alabama webpage at: <https://www.outdooralabama.com/coastal-programs/alabama-coastal-area-management-program>.



Gulf Shores,
photo by Colette Boehm

Natural Resources as a Means to Grow Our Ecotourism Economy

A Partnership for Preservation and Promotion

BY COLETTE BOEHM, DIRECTOR OF SPECIAL PROJECTS, GULF SHORES & ORANGE BEACH TOURISM

“The natural resources of our coastal area, from the beautiful beaches and inland waters to the trails through the diverse landscapes of our Gulf State Park and National Wildlife Refuge, are a big part of what makes this destination so popular with visitors,” says Beth Gendler, President/CEO of Gulf Shores & Orange Beach Tourism (GSOBT).

Through GSOBT’s efforts and those of its partners, 6.4 million of those visitors come to Alabama’s beaches each year. County-wide, that number is 8 million.

Through a longstanding partnership with the Alabama Department of Conservation & Natural Resources (ADCNR), GSOBT promotes sustainable use and enjoyment of the nature-based assets of the City of Gulf Shores, City of Orange Beach, and the surrounding coastal region.

“Our partnership with ADCNR is the perfect opportunity to come together to achieve our common goals and to expand the influence of each of our organizations,” Gendler said. “While we are based in Gulf Shores and Orange Beach, long ago, our board recognized the value of promoting a broader footprint for nature-based tourism. We want to give people more reasons to stay a day longer

or come back for another visit. And, of course, helping them understand the impacts they can have, both positive and negative, on our natural world is a part of our mission.”

What began years ago as a joint effort between ADCNR and GSOBT to support a fledgling sea turtle conservation group known as *Share the Beach*, has grown into a dynamic partnership. Two outstanding examples of that are the Alabama Coastal Birding Trail, the first trail of its kind in the State, which offers more than 50 of the best birding sites throughout Baldwin and Mobile County, and Alabama’s Coastal Connection, a driving route through both counties



Alabama current connection

About the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program

Program: The Mobile Bay National Estuary Program's mission is to lead the wise stewardship of water quality and living resources of Mobile Bay and the Tensaw Delta. The MBNEP serves as a catalyst for activities of estuary stakeholders, helping to build community-based organizational capacity for sound resource management and leveraging commitment and investment to ensure the estuary's sustainability. For more information, please contact the MBNEP office at 251-431-6409.

About ADCNR, State Lands Division, Coastal Section

Section: In an effort to protect and enhance coastal resources and reduce potential conflicts between environmental and economic interests, the Alabama Coastal Area Management Program (ACAMP) was approved by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in 1979. The ACAMP is administered through the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, State Lands Division, Coastal Section. For more information, contact the Coastal Section office at 251-621-1216.

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Alabama Current Connection encourages reprinting of its articles in other publications. If you would like to subscribe, email mbnep@mobilebaynep.com. If you have recommendations for future articles, please contact:

Vanessa Y. Romero
Mobile Bay National Estuary Program
118 North Royal Street, Suite 601
Mobile, AL 36602
Office: 251-380-7937
Fax: 251-431-6450
E-mail: vromero@mobilebaynep.com
www.mobilebaynep.com

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that has gained both State and National Scenic Byway designation. The byway program promotes the scenic, natural, and recreational aspects along the designated route. Other ongoing programs supported by the initiative are the *Leave Only Footprints* anti-litter campaign on Alabama's beaches, and annual events such as the Alabama Coastal Birdfest and Alabama's Coastal Cleanup.

"Our promotional efforts and marketing expertise combined with

the knowledge and resources of the ADCNR staff has been such a successful collaboration through the years," Gendler notes. "We are incredibly grateful for their willingness to partner with us to ensure both our organizations craft the best messages and implement the best marketing and outreach efforts for promoting and sustaining the natural assets that make this destination so special."

Alabama current connection

Dauphin Island Sea Lab
Marine Environmental Science Consortium
101 Bienville Boulevard
Dauphin Island, AL 36528

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Mobile, AL 36601



MBNEP Executive Committee Welcomes New Members

This year, the MBNEP welcomed a new slate of Executive Committee leaders who will steer the actions of the MBNEP Management Conference, a group of over 300 community leaders from academia, business and industry, government, grassroots groups, and environmental agencies.

The Committee develops policies on issues and funding, reviews/approves work plans, sets financial goals for non-federal share obligation required to match EPA funds received, and provides a platform for vetting emerging environmental issues from multiple perspectives.

The Executive Committee provides guidance to the MBNEP in championing the implementation of the *Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan* for Alabama's Estuaries and Coast.

The 2024 leadership and Executive Committee members

New Executive Committee members include four at-large members:

- Dr. LeBaron Byrd, Tribal Chief of the MOWA Choctaw Indians
- Marc Wyatt, Director of the U.S. EPA Gulf of Mexico Division
- Keith Martin, Councilman and Chair of the Land and Natural Resources Committee for the Poarch Band of Creek Indians
- Steve Stewart, Board President of Partners for Environmental Progress

The following Management Conference Co-Chairs were elected and will serve for two years.

Science Advisory Committee:

- Steve Jones, Division Chief of Geological Survey of Alabama
- Dottie Byron, Program Manager for Alabama's Center of Excellence for Dauphin Island Sea Lab Center of Excellence

Business Resources Committee:

- John Barton, CEO of TC Boiler & Piping
- Eliska Morgan, Government Relations and Business Development Manager for Thompson Engineering

Community Action Committee:

- Ted Henken, Fowl River Area Civic Association
- Leslie Gahagan, President of Wolf Bay Watershed Watch

Project Implementation Committee:

- Shannon McGlynn, Nonpoint Source Specialist for ADEM, Nonpoint Source Unit
- Will Underwood, ADCNR's Coastal Section Administrator

Finance Committee:

- Patti McCurdy, Director of ADCNR, State Lands Division

Government Networks Committee:

- Merceria Ludgood, Mobile County Commissioner
- Charles Gruber, Baldwin County Commissioner

Executive Committee members are:

- Chris Blankenship, ADCNR Commissioner
- Chris Thomas, U.S. EPA Region 4 Senior Advisor to the Administrator
- Dr. John Valentine, Director of Marine Environmental Science Consortium/Dauphin Island Sea Lab
- Dr. LaDon Swann, Director of Mississippi Alabama Sea Grant Consortium
- Justin McDonald, Chief of Programs and Project Management for Civil Works at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Mobile District
- Brandon McCray, Acting State Conservationist for USDA NRCS
- Dr. William Puckett, Director of the Alabama Soil and Water Conservation Committee
- Fred Leslie, Senior Environmental Manager at ADEM
- Troy Ephriam, Owner, Ephriam & Associates Environmental
- Beth Thomas, Alabama Power's External Affairs Manager
- Bradley Byrne, President of the Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce
- John Driscoll, Director of the Alabama Port Authority
- Elizabeth Roney, District Director for Congressman Jerry Carl