

Mobile Bay National Estuary Program Executive Committee Meeting
GoogleMeet Virtual Meeting
Wednesday, August 26, 2020 10:00 - 11:30 am

Attendees:

Chris Blankenship, ADCNR
Casi Callaway, Mobile Baykeeper
Greg Dansby for Ben Malone, USDA-NRCS State Office
Jennifer Denson, Partners for Environmental Progress
Troy Ephriam, Ephriam & Associates Consulting, LLC
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

Kathy Hill, Indian River Lagoon National Estuary Program
Amy Hunter, ADCNR
Romell Nandi, US EPA
Justin McDonald, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Eliska Morgan, Thompson Engineering
Chris Plymale, US EPA Region 4
Frank Smith, Wilkins Miller Wealth Management
LaDon Swann, Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium
Beth Thomas, Alabama Power
John Valentine, Dauphin Island Sea Lab

MBNEP Staff Present: *Roberta Swann, Christian Miller, Tiffany England, Jason Kudulis, Kelley Barfoot, Katie Dylewski, Madison Blanchard, Ben Brenner, Herndon Graddick, 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 March 13, 2020 meeting. Dr. Mimi Fearn made a motion to approve, Troy Ephriam seconded the motion.
3. **Director's Report**
 - a) Top Accomplishments:
 - Budget vs Actual (as of 7-31-20 and ending 9-30-20), ordered by CCMP Action:
 - **Estuary Status & Trends:** NFWF dollars for long term Fowl River monitoring and baseline sediment monitoring
 - **Ecosystem Restoration & Protection:** around \$9 million includes remaining watershed management plans from the Coastal Restoration Initiative grant, new RESTORE funds for 12 Mile Creek construction, Engineering and Design for Fowl River Spits, and a new grant for the Lower Fish River restoration
 - **Technical Assistance & Capacity Building:** citizen science and volunteer monitoring supplies
 - **Education & Public Involvement:** video production, Clean Water Future, Management Conference support, and special events
 - **Management, Project Delivery, Administration:** D'Olive Watershed project delivery
 - Ms. Swann discussed a pie chart showing the percentages of funding sources for the first two years of our newest 5-year EPA funding grant: 10% EPA Section 320 funds, 23% carry over external funds from before 10-1-18, and 67% external funds.
 - We released *The Unintended Consequences of Convenience: A Story of Coal Ash in Alabama* and all of the sources used to develop the film.
Visit http://www.mobilebaynep.com/the_issues/legacy_contaminants/ for more information.
 - Through our relationship with the Town of Dauphin Island and our *Trash Blows* campaign, we were able to do live streaming of weigh-ins and other activities during the Alabama Deep Sea Fishing Rodeo.
 - We completed a virtual tour video of the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta, narrated by Barry Vittor.
 - The Deer River shoreline stabilization is at 30% design and we are getting ready to submit the permit.
 - Fowl River project expanded to include Bellingrath Marsh, at NFWF's recommendation.

- Thompson Engineering was awarded the contract for the Eastern Shore Watershed Management Plan, which includes Fly Creek, Yancy Branch, and down to just below Pointe Clear.
- Issued an RFQ for the Lower Fish River restoration project, due September 9.

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

Science Advisory Committee

Dr. Amy Hunter reported on the SAC meetings from July 24 and August 12. The off-cycle July 24 meeting focused on four different watershed modeling efforts: Meredith LaDart, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers- Alabama Coastal Comprehensive Plan; Dr. John Lerhter and Dr. Latif Kalin, Auburn University- SWAT Model for Mobile Bay; Dr. Mohammad Al-Hamdan, NASA- SPARROW Water Quality Modeling; and John Curry, Hydro- GSSHA Modeling for Mobile Bay Sub-watersheds. Committee members, co-chairs, and staff continued developing a conceptual model framework to evaluate stressors for pollutants of concern. The subcommittee realized a need for two approaches moving forward, with the second being a more robust mental model structured decision-making approach to determine linkages. PIs are finalizing the Fowl River Marsh Study Technical Report. The SAC was given presentations about the Coal Ash film, but did not sign-on or approve anything about the film.

Project Implementation Committee

Ms. Judy Haner and Ms. Katie Dylewski reported on the August 13 PIC meeting, which had over 70 participants. The meeting focused on **A Journey Across the Watersheds**- the projects going on in both Mobile and Baldwin Counties:

- To date, nine watershed plans have been completed across 16 “HUC-12s”.
- Plans have been completed and are being implemented for Bayou La Batre, West Fowl, Fowl River, Dog River, Three Mile Creek, Weeks Bay, Bon Secour, and D’Olive, which is currently being updated. Wolf Bay is also out for public comment.
- Currently in planning, we have the Western Shore, Mobile Tensaw Apalachee Delta, Fly Creek, and the Gulf Frontal Complex.
- Across all of the watersheds the top priorities were water quality (such as pathogens, stormwater, sediment), trash, habitat protection, and recreational access.
- Many pointed out that engaging stakeholders early and utilizing a local champion to build trust among stakeholders was key for long term community buy-in in order to propel plan implementation. For those still in planning, adapting stakeholder engagement to virtual platforms was a large topic of discussion.
- The biggest highlight for this meeting was the level of collaboration among the partners working on these watershed management plans.
- Other updates included restoration of the headwaters of 12 Mile Creek, with expected bidding for December construction and TNC’s Lightning Point, with construction completed two months ahead of schedule. Several shoreline projects are also currently in engineering and design phases.

Government Networks Committee

Mr. Christian Miller presented on the August 14 GNC meeting. The NEP has wrapped up their coal ash project and all GNC members are encouraged to take advantage of these resources and to communicate their effectiveness to colleagues and constituents. State, counties, and local municipalities have been great supporters of MBNEP since its inception, but more work is needed to strategize with the Finance Committee on long-term funding for the program. The counties and municipalities have realized great benefits from their participation with the MBNEP through leveraging of funds to complete priority projects and provision of educational materials supporting programs and meeting MS4 requirements.

Community Action Committee

Dr. Mimi Fearn reported on the August 11 CAC meeting, which has been having better participation being virtual meetings. Katie Dylewski was our guest speaker. She gave a presentation on invasive plant species. Prior to the meeting she asked CAC members to submit photos of any plant species they would like identified. Katie researched the photos and descriptions and provided information and management suggestions for each species. Madison Blanchard provided the group with a status report of the volunteer monitoring program. Mobile County currently has 40 active sites with 49 monitors and Baldwin County has 42 active sites with 34 monitors. There were 27 monitors trained in 2019. The goal for the CAC for the 2021 year is to develop a comprehensive strategy for volunteer monitoring. Next meeting will take place virtually on November 10.

Business Resources Committee

Eliska Morgan reported on the August 12 BRC meeting. The BRC has reviewed challenges facing the oyster aquaculture industry in Alabama which fall into the following broad categories: Access to capital, Access to water bottoms, monitoring/management, and marketing/awareness. The BRC has decided to focus on several projects related to supporting the oyster farming industry in Alabama and formed sub-committees to work on the following: Finance/capital availability, Marketing, Dauphin Island Oyster Project. The CORE project run by MASGC, and partially funded by Alabama Power represents an early success for the BRC as they focus on aiding the local oyster farmers. Dr. LaDon Swann thanked the Alabama Power Foundation for their assistance in this project.

Community Resources Committee

Walter Ernest and Casi Callaway reported on the CRC, which met virtually July 15 and August 13. A consensus was reached on CRC Work Plan goals and objectives related to Trash Removal. The goals and objectives for the Work Plan are being finalized around the following topics: Litter reduction and prevention, Litter removal, Recycling, Policy/legislative actions, formal/informal education, Awareness/outreach, and Behavior change. MBNEP provided a PowerPoint presentation documenting the organization's trash abatement experiences. Other CRC organizations were encouraged to do likewise. A presentation on *Ditch the Disposables* stimulated conversation about opportunities about the need for collaboration and co-branding. MBNEP will begin maintenance of an online database tracking CRC and other Management Conference committee organization's trash abatement-related activities to identify gaps, encourage collaboration, and avoid duplication of efforts.

Finance Committee

Helene Hassell and Jennifer Denson have agreed to co-chair the newly re-established Finance Committee. The committee met in July 2020 to work on the MBNEP Finance Strategy planning for the future and discuss who should sit on the committee.

5. Old Business

6. New Business

EPA Program Evaluation: The Program Evaluation (PE) is typically an in-person site visit where US EPA will visit restoration sites and meet with MBNEP staff. However, due to COVID-19, this PE had to be virtual. Our evaluation team consists of: Romell Nandi, US EPA Headquarters, Coordinator for Mobile Bay and lead on Trash Free Waters Program; Chris Plymale, US EPA Region 4 Coordinator; Kathy Hill, Deputy Director for Indian River Lagoon NEP; and Duane De Freese, not present due to health issues.

- The Program Evaluation is about the NEP showcasing its good work and for US EPA to recommend potential pathways for exploration and improvement within their program. After attending each committee meeting this quarter, the PE team gave their findings. Mr. Romell Nandi stated that the most important reason for the evaluation is to make recommendations for the program to be more effective in implementing its CCMP. Mr. Nandi quickly discussed the steps to the evaluation. The current evaluation period is October 1, 2013 – September 30, 2018. First, MBNEP submits PE package, including self-assessment and narrative summary of projects. The PE Team reviews package and asks questions of Director, attends NEP site visit, and if necessary, has post-visit conversation with the Director. The PE

Team recommends Pass/Fail/Conditional Pass to EPA management. EPA sends a draft PE letter to the NEP for comment. After any changes are incorporated, a final letter is signed by Partnership Program Branch Chief and sent to the NEP Director. MBNEP will work with EPA Region 4 and the Executive Committee to implement the recommendations.

- Our main strengths as a Program:
 - **Management Conference**
 - The Management Conference is high-performing and involved in all aspects of program management.
 - Staff and Committee Chairs perform admirable work in keeping momentum on project implementation.
 - The Management Conference has a very wide array of partners from various sectors to bring expertise and energy to bear for the program to effectively implement its CCMP.
 - **Watershed Planning**
 - Mobile Bay is a national leader in watershed management and project implementation.
 - The program demonstrates significant levels of buy-in from and collaboration with the state, local governments, and NGOs.
 - The accomplishments realized in D'Olive, Three Mile Creek, and other coastal watersheds undergoing WMP implementation have brought additional partners to the table and catalyzed successful planning and implementation efforts in other watersheds.
 - Working, where appropriate, with watershed complexes has allowed for planning efficiency benefits by reducing duplicative efforts and maximizing the efficacy of stakeholder participation and issue identification.
 - **Monitoring and Data Collection-** During the period covered by the evaluation, the Science Advisory Committee has:
 - Determined baseline conditions through sediment analyses, hydrologic modeling, and mapping;
 - Developed a restoration monitoring framework;
 - Developed and calibrated a watershed condition index framework for measuring watershed health;
 - Conducted extensive monitoring in the D'Olive Creek, Tiawasee Creek, and Joe's Branch to "test" the framework.
 - **Science Communication and Data Accessibility**
 - Status and trends information has been communicated through:
 - Community meetings held as part of watershed planning;
 - Annual report videos;
 - Articles in *Alabama Current Connections*;
 - The updated CCMP section on what was learned over the past five years through monitoring efforts.
 - Now working on data accessibility through:
 - Building a more elaborate data cataloging system on meteorological information, scientific studies, remote sensing, modeling, and other information valuable for developing adaptive management strategies to build a decision support tool for better marine planning.
 - **Strong funding support from Federal, State, and local partners**
- Some opportunities include ways for synergy between the Management Conference Committees:
 - SAC and CAC could determine appropriate parameters, sites, and protocols where volunteer-collected data could help answer specific questions or identify issues.
 - CAC and CRC have areas of commonality that may benefit from joint efforts or the development of public-facing products for web, print, or social media that engage potential volunteers and inform the public about progress.
 - The BRC has done an excellent work in identifying and utilizing resources to assist the oyster aquaculture industry. Consultation with the PIC, GNC and CRC may reveal other industry sectors that could be engaged to similar effect.

- Other opportunities include:
 - **Identify and address monitoring gaps**
 - Consider an update to the Monitoring Framework as soon as is practical to include incorporating shoreline monitoring protocols and addressing citizen science opportunities.
 - **Consider consolidation of branding within the Program's various trash-related initiatives**
 - Evaluate the possibility of consolidating the Program's various trash-focused or campaigns (Create a Clean Water Future, Ditch the Disposables, Reduce the Use, Trash Blows) under a common branding umbrella.
 - **Engaging non-contributing local governments**
 - The Program should engage the expertise available within the variety of committees in the Management Conference in how best to make a case for funding participation from non-contributing local governments.

In other words, WE PASSED!

7. Other / Announcements

- We have a Hurricane watch party for *The Flight of the Frigate Bird* re-release on August 29. Watch at www.flightofthefrigatebird.com
- We have partnered with Dog River Clearwater Revival on a litter abatement grant and are working on a Truck Bed Trash Can Competition with a \$3,500 cash prize for the winner.
- Bays and Bayous will be virtual from December 1-3, 2020. Abstracts are due September 20. Presentations will be pre-recorded.

The meeting adjourned at 11:30 a.m.