

**Mobile Bay National Estuary Program
Government Networks Committee Meeting
Original Oyster House, Mobile AL
September 16, 2016**



The Mobile Bay National Estuary Program Government Networks Committee was established to bring State agencies and regional government administrators together with local officials of Mobile and Baldwin counties to more effectively communicate local needs/understand State agency functions and priorities. The goal of this committee is to articulate innovative ways to improve communications and management of our coastal environment.

In attendance:

Guy Busby, Baldwin County Legislative Delegation; Charles ‘Skip’ Gruber, Baldwin County Commission; Merceria Ludgood, Mobile County Commission; Patti Powell, Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources; Joseph Abston, Washington County Commission; Willie Long, Washington County Commission; James Adams, Town of Mount Vernon; Jeff Collier, Town of Dauphin Island; Bill Hightower, Alabama State Senate; Scott Hughes, ADEM; Mike McMillan, City of Spanish Fort; Tom Williams, City of Satsuma; Phillip West, City of Orange Beach; Veronica Hudson, City of Saraland; Chris Elliot, Baldwin County Commission; Joe Faust, Alabama House of Representatives; Patsy Parker, Town of Perdido Beach; Margie Wilcox, Alabama House of Representatives; Eliska Morgan, AL GCRC; Bill Puckett, AL SWCC; Evan Davis, ALDOT; Matt Hinton, City of Spanish Fort; Kae Hamilton, Town of Perdido Beach; Chris Thomas, EPA Region 4; Chris Plymale, EPA Region 4; Barbara Gibson, CPYR WMA; Shannon McGlynn, ADEM; Susan Dingman, ADEM

MBNEP Staff: Roberta Swann, Rick Frederick, Christian Miller, Dixie Pomerat

Takeaways

- The Federal RESTORE council is currently undergoing a mandatory update of their comprehensive plan. The fourth round of NFWF-GEBF projects are currently in the review process and should be announced in November.
- The Create a Clean Water Future campaign provides free tools to municipalities and other partners to help meet MS4 requirements and educate residents on how to reduce stormwater pollution and protect coastal water quality.
- Currently, implementation of WMP recommendations are underway in Fowl River; WMPs are under development in Bon Secour River, Bayou La Batre, Dog River, and Weeks Bay; remaining WMPs (including the lower Tensaw and Wolf Bay) will commence once Federal RESTORE funding is made available.
- Watershed Management Authorities are Governmental subdivisions of the State of Alabama and provide a mechanism for managing stormwater and water resources on a watershed basis. Choctawhatchee Pea and Yellow Rivers Watershed Management Authority is currently the only WMA in Alabama, and has a demonstrated history of successful watershed management across geopolitical boundaries.

Commissioners Merceria Ludgood and Charles ‘Skip’ Gruber welcomed participants. The meeting was called to order at 8:01 a.m. and Commissioner Gruber moved to approve the minutes from the previous meeting, a moved to approve the minutes was made by Mike McMillan, and the minutes were approved.

Next on the agenda, Patti Powell and Eliska Morgan gave an update on the status of RESTORE & NFWF-GEBF funding.

Patti gave an update on the Federal RESTORE process: Federal level the RESTORE Council is holding a series of meetings around the Gulf to update their comprehensive plan before the November elections. The Alabama meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, September 20th at 5 Rivers at 6:00 PM. Make sure you have signed up for email updates on the Alabama Restore website in order to receive timely notices on meetings.

Next, Eliska updated the group on the status of NFWF-GEBF. Currently working on the 4th phase of projects, to be announced in November. The projects that Alabama has submitted are good projects. After the first of the year, we will begin looking at projects for the next round of GEBF funding. Eliska would be happy to speak with people individually about project ideas, and to make sure they are entered into the project portal for consideration. There will be four new members on the Alabama council starting in November (which represents 40% of the total membership), so they must be brought up to speed quickly.

Patti reiterated that GNC members should not hesitate to call her or Eliska with questions. This process can be confusing, especially for newly elected officials who haven't participated in this process before.
<http://www.restorealabama.org/>

Rick updated the group on the Create a Clean Water Future campaign. This is a public outreach campaign, the purpose of which is to educate about stormwater runoff and associated impacts on water quality. It was created several years ago by the MBNEP and a host of partners. The group came up with a logo, program, and website. The goal was to help local municipalities meet their educational and outreach components of their MS4 requirements. All of the materials are free and available on the website. The cities of Daphne and Fairhope have used these materials regularly in publications. The new website gives recommendations of actions to take to help keep our water clean. This campaign has been promoted outside of coastal Alabama, and several municipalities in north Alabama have joined. There is no cost to participate in this campaign.
<http://www.cleanwaterfuture.com/>

Next, Roberta gave an update on the status of watershed planning on the coast. Roberta showed a watershed map, at the HUC 12 level, detailing which plans were completed, in process, or waiting for funding to become available. It is anticipated that RESTORE funding would be made available in early 2017 to resume the process. Under recommendations of the PIC, watersheds have been grouped where it makes sense to do which has created economies of scale allowing for subsequent work (sediment studies) to inform the WMP process.

Fowl River: first GEBF funded watershed. Thanks to mobile county commission for passing a resolution of support. The first action upon plan completion is to go to the governing body and ask for support of the plan. Have recently completed watershed signage and working with Mobile County on installation. An initial project was submitted to NFWF-GEBF to stabilize priority coastal shorelines, complete a hydrologic study of the watershed to inform future restoration/implementation projects, and completion of

a comprehensive study of marsh health. Currently working on the restoration of the tip of Mon Louis Island. A rock sill has been completed, and efforts are now underway to fill in with sediment behind that structure to complete a four-acre marsh expansion. The dredging of the ship channel should be completed by the end of October.

Bayou La Batre: The biggest issues in the Bayou deal with access and community resilience. The citizens are aware of the issues of moving critical infrastructure away from the water. Another issue that must be addressed is stormwater and sewer infrastructure that has led to SSOs. Working with TNC to explore the possible acquisition of properties at the mouth of the Bayou. West Fowl River, Dauphin Island and the Bayou are all inter-related, so there was an opportunity to group these plans together. The community engagement and characterization of West Fowl is underway, and initial engagement has begun in Dauphin Island, but the bulk of that WMP will not commence until RESTORE funding becomes available.

Bo Secour: This complex includes Bon Secour, Oyster Bay and Skunk Bayou. Conservation and preservation of remaining upland, riparian, and wetland habitats has emerged as a priority. Living shorelines and conservation/restoration of riparian buffers are also recommendations. There is a major gap of available water quality and other data for the watersheds. Working with Baldwin County to address the need for a comprehensive hydrologic model for the watershed.

Dog River: This is a large watershed, issues with water quality are concentrated in the upper watershed which is the highly urbanized areas of the City of Mobile. Focusing attention on litter issues, illicit discharges/SSOs. MAWSS has is looking to install some treatment/detention cells to increase capacity during high flow events. A stakeholder work group developed a suite of recommended management measures that focused on conservation/protection of remaining wetland and riparian areas, installation of living shoreline projects along the river, litter management (including education), mitigating stormwater and SSOs, and increasing opportunities for Access.

Weeks Bay: This combines both the Fish River and Magnolia River watersheds. There has been very active stakeholder engagement focusing on determining strengths/weaknesses/opportunities/threats. Characterization ongoing which includes the development of a watershed model to predict impacts of future growth and recommended management measures. The stakeholder meeting was very effective. Over 100 people participated broken out by group. I participated in the developer group, they suggested a surcharge that could be directed toward watershed protection/stormwater management within the watershed.

Merceria asked about the status of the lower Tensaw and the schedule for beginning that WMP Patty – this is a good story of combining funding. The RESTORE group, under the Federal council, is required to establish its own infrastructure for managing those funds, which is currently ongoing. It is will most likely be after the beginning of 2017 before that funding is available. The funding is fully committed, it is just in the process of getting their infrastructure up and running. Roberta said the priority will be to get both the Tensaw and Wolf Bay projects going as soon as the funding becomes available.

Mike Eubanks next spoke to the group about the Weeks Bay process. The Weeks Bay watershed has a tremendous amount of data due to the presence of the NERR, one of the challenges is working with nine municipalities and the county and understanding the best way to deal with all of the disparate regulations. At the stakeholder work group, stormwater was an issue for each group. The developers were interested in LID, but unfortunately a lot of the regulations don't make that easy. The mayors/elected officials agreed that was something that needed to be addressed. We are in month nine of a 15-month process. We are working on developing regulatory matrix to address inconsistencies in zoning and regulations throughout the watershed. Mike asked that the group please support their staff in helping to complete inventories to inform this process.

Next Christian mentioned the regulatory assessment that MBNEP is conducting in cooperation with the Sea Grant Legal Program. The goal of this process is to assess ordinances/regulations across both Mobile and Baldwin counties and develop recommendations for improving management of stormwater and natural resources. This was a strategy that was outline for the GNC in the current CCMP.

Christian then introduced the featured speaker, Barbara Gibson, the Executive Director of the Choctawhatchee, Pea and Yellow Rivers Watershed Management Authority.

Barbara said that in Jan 1989, a group of concerned citizens got together to address watershed issues, spurred by flooding in the City of Elba, and formed the Choctawhatchee-Pea River Improvement Association. In May of 1991, the AL legislature passed a law providing for the establishment of watershed management authorities in the state of Alabama. In September of 1997, the Choctawhatchee-Pea Rivers Watershed Management Authority was formed. In 1997 this WMA expanded to include the Yellow River becoming the Choctawhatchee, Pea and Yellow Rivers Watershed Management Authority. The WMA is governed by a Board of Directors (16 volunteers) that includes all the counties within the WMA.

The WMA encompasses 2,328,000 acres/3,484 sq miles. The Yellow River has been described as one of the more pristine water bodies in Alabama. It originates near Opp in Covington County and drains south eventually joining the Blackwater River in Florida. Over 56% of the watershed is forested with about 20% devoted to pasture and cropland. The Pea River rises southeast of Union Springs in Bullock County and is the largest tributary of the Choctawhatchee River. It flows southwest and joins the Choctawhatchee River near Geneva. About 53% of the Pea River watershed is forested with 18% in pasture and cropland. Swampy headwater wetlands near Clayton in Barbour County form the east and west forks of the Choctawhatchee River. The forks merge near Newton to form the main stem of the river which flows south and joins the Pea River near Geneva. It is one of the longest free-flowing rivers remaining in Alabama. Forests cover about 43% of the watershed with 26% in pasture and cropland.

Why should we consider Watershed Management Authorities?

- Governmental subdivisions of State of Alabama – Act No. 91-602
- Formed according to nature’s boundaries – watersheds
- Inclusion of input at the “grass roots” level
- Governed by local stakeholders
- A proven and effective concept; a successful watershed management authority has operated in Alabama for the past 25 years

Legislative intent: “to provide for the establishment of watershed management authorities, and to authorize said entities to protect and manage the watersheds of this state.”

Purpose of WMAs “developing and executing plans and programs relating to any phase of conservation of water, water usage, flood prevention, flood control, water pollution control, wildlife habitat protection, agricultural and timberland protection, erosion prevention and control of erosion, flood-water and sediment damages.”

Barba then explained the framework for managing water resources through the WMA which focuses around four areas:

1. Surface and ground water availability: Determine how much water is available from surface and ground water sources.
2. Water use: Identify all water users, determine how much water is used, for what purposes, and how the water may be used more efficiently.
3. Environmental flows: Determine how much water should remain in surface channels to support fish and wildlife populations and sustain water production functions of our natural hydrologic system.
4. Management practices: Identify and implement management practices necessary to meet identified needs while protecting water resources.

Barbara then detailed some of the accomplishments of the CPYR WMA

- Conducted more than 270 scientific studies and watershed-wide projects
- Developed only comprehensive watershed management plan in state
- Operates only basin-wide Flood Warning System in state
- Completed hydrologic characterization of all water resources in the watersheds
- Participated in major levee rehab projects in Elba and Geneva, AL
- Mapped all groundwater aquifers in ten southeastern counties locating over 317 water wells and deep oil and gas wells
- Received FEMA 2001 Gulf Guardian Award for creation of Procedural Manual for Recommended Maintenance of Unpaved Roads
- Produced basic geographic, cultural, and scientific data for watersheds

Barbara said the CPYR WMA operates and maintains the largest and only basin-wide Flood Warning System in the state. It consists of 22 rain and river gauges in eight counties which electronically monitor rainfall and stream depths. These data are used to forecast stream flood levels and are transmitted to the Emergency Management Agency offices and to the National Weather Service which utilize the data in declaring official flood warnings in these river systems.

Barbara said the WMA is committed to understanding water issues from an information and data perspective - a perspective which would be effective in Alabama's water management future. It has built a unified stakeholder base to not only understand complicated water resource issues but to work in a cooperative and constructive way to find creative solutions for addressing water-resource challenges in the region.

To summarize, the "watershed management authority" concept, embodied in the philosophy of regionally-specific, information and data-based decision making, is a proven concept that has worked in southeast Alabama and which fits perfectly into the state policy plan as a mechanism for local governance.

For more information, contact Barbara Gibson, Director
Choctawhatchee, Pea and Yellow Rivers Watershed Management Authority
400 Pell Ave., Collegeview Bldg.
Troy, AL 36082
(334) 670-3780
www.cpyrwma.alabama.gov
choctaw@troy.edu

Meeting adjourned at 9:00 AM