

**Mobile Bay National Estuary Program
Government Networks Committee Meeting
International Trade Center, Mobile AL
August 10, 2012**



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:

Congressman Jo Bonner, United States House of Representatives
Rhonda Bryars, Baldwin County Soil and Water Conservation District
Jeff Collier, Town of Dauphin Island
Newton Cromer, City of Saraland
Randy Davis, Alabama State House of Representatives
Valerie Day, Senator Jeff Sessions
Tucker Dorsey, Baldwin County Commission
Darrell Driskell, Mobile County Soil and Water Conservation District
Jennifer Fidler, City of Fairhope
Rusty Glover, Alabama Senate
Charles 'Skip' Gruber, Baldwin County Commission
John Guarisco, Alabama Department of Public Health, Montgomery
Ralph Hellmich, City of Foley
Bob Howard, Environmental Protection Agency
Jamie Ison, Alabama State House of Representatives
Brian Keller, Mobile County Soil and Water Conservation District
Joey Koptis, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Baldwin County
Lance LeFleur, Alabama Department of Environmental Management
Merceria Ludgood, Mobile County
Eliska Morgan, Congressman Jo Bonner
Patti Powell, Alabama Department of Conservation Natural Resources
Ray Richardson, City of Mobile
John Valentine, Dauphin Island Sea Lab
David Yarbrough, Mobile Airport Authority
MBNEP Staff: Roberta Swann, Kathy Eddy, Brenda Lowther, Kelley Barfoot

On Friday, August 10, 2012, the first of these committee meetings was held. Commissioners Merceria Ludgood and Skip Gruber welcomed participants. Speakers included Congressman Jo Bonner, ADCNR-State Lands Director Patti Powell, Gulf Ecosystem Restoration Task Force Executive Director John Hankinson, ADEM Director Lance LeFleur and MBNEP Director Roberta Swann.

Congressman Bonner provided opening remarks. Rep. Bonner spoke on the importance of the Gulf Coast and the State of Alabama, stating this is the most exciting time for the entire Gulf Coast community. ***A great deal of team work happened to get the Restore Act passed and now the leaders of this community have a tremendous opportunity and responsibility to ensure the preservation of our community for future generations.***

Ms. Patti Powell spoke on behalf of ADCNR Commissioner Gunter Guy. Ms. Powell spoke on the meaning of collaboration and its importance within the Gulf Coast community. Ms. Powell stated

collaboration means you are actively working together and listening to the issues and needs of each group. Ms. Powell stated the NEP represents every aspect of the community and is an existing structure that has a mission of developing consensus among the many stakeholder interests of the coast for protecting these natural assets. She stated this structure provides an opportunity for diverse sectors to leverage their time and resources toward common goals. Ms. Powell closed by stating *everyone's actions impact each other and we need to all work together* to restore and protect our coastal resources.

Mr. Hankinson spoke on his history with the Gulf Coast and the NEP. Mr. Hankinson helped to establish the NEP during the early 1990's. Since then he has been involved with the EPA and its various environmental initiatives. Mr. Hankinson was appointed Executive Director of the Restoration Taskforce in November of 2011. He described the establishment of the taskforce by the President and stated the President gave strict instructions to the taskforce of how to devise a restoration plan based on local knowledge and expertise. Mr. Hankinson spoke regarding various environmental issues along the Gulf Coast and the importance of habitat restoration and water quality. He encouraged the group to *get involved with the MBNEP Management Conference as it was one of seven in the Gulf that are uniquely situated to promote common environmental goals that are representative of the entire coastal Alabama community.*

Mr. Lance LeFleur addressed the Restore Act and how it will be the biggest event that will take place along the Gulf Coast economically. He reiterated the importance of the Gulf Coast and remarked that Mobile Bay is the seventh largest port in the nation for foreign trade, and the watershed that forms Mobile Bay is the fourth largest watershed in terms of flow in the nation. Mr. LeFleur described the Port of Mobile as an industrial hub for seafood, chemicals, steel, oil, and gas, and as such it is a tremendous asset, not only to Alabama but to the entire nation. He described Mobile Bay as being threatened by uncontrolled stormwater that carries a host of pollutants into the bay. Mr. LeFleur spoke of his agency's experience in collaborating with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the Alabama Department of Transportation, the Geological Survey of Alabama, the Cities of Daphne and Spanish Fort, the MBNEP and a private property owner to undertake the restoration of a tributary to Joe's Branch in Spanish Fort. He stated *restoration of past environmental impacts is not an easy undertaking and that it is going to take all of us, working together, to get the job done.* Mr. LeFleur described Mobile as a crown jewel, but the only way to protect it is to work together.

Ms. Roberta Swann provided an overview of the program. Ms. Swann provided a presentation which included the background of the MBNEP and discussed the importance of the Mobile Bay watershed, its habitats and the stress placed on the system by conversion of land use, sharing slides that show the growth in land cover between 1974 and 2008 for the Bayou Sara, Fly Creek, Bay Minette, Dog River, Dauphin Island and Little Lagoon watersheds. She discussed the importance of the Port of Mobile and its \$10 billion annual contribution to the State's economy, but she also noted that wakes from the ships contribute to shoreline erosion, especially on the Western Shore of the bay. She stated in the business world, asset management is very important, and that our coastal waters and habitats need to be considered as assets in the same way; we need to understand what we have, where it is, who controls it, and what can be done to decrease losses related to it.

Ms. Swann noted that the MBNEP's Management Conference charge was to ensure the environmental health of the Mobile Bay estuary and defined environmental health to be those aspects of human health, including quality of life, that are determined by physical, chemical, biological, social and psychosocial factors in the environment. It also refers to the theory and practice of *assessing, correcting, controlling and preventing those factors in the environment that can potentially adversely affect the health of present and future generations.*

Closing remarks were given by Commissioners Gruber and Ludgood. Both encouraged members of the audience *to consider joining the Government Networks Committee to participate in developing common environmental goals and strategies for how local governments can collaborate to achieve environmental health.* This meeting will be followed up with a survey of invitees to gather input on local environmental values and concerns. The meeting was adjourned at 9:45 a.m.