

2003 Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program Office Summary

Water Quality Data Analysis and Report for the Charlotte Harbor NEP

Janicki Environmental Inc. delivered the first large original research project contracted by the Charlotte Harbor NEP. The Water Quality Status and Trends analysis included thousands of tables to support local water quality trends analysis. Staff summarized the findings and presented them to the Policy Committee. In general, water quality is degrading more than it is improving. Total Suspended Solids (TSS) is the parameter demonstrating the most degradation. Of the seven basins in the CHNEP study area, the Caloosahatchee River and Estero Bay basins are degrading the most. The Peace River basin is the only basin with more improvements than degradation. The other four basins are stable.

Legislative Agenda

The Charlotte Harbor NEP Policy Committee created a Legislative Subcommittee with membership from the Policy Committee, Management Committee, TAC and CAC. It developed a draft legislative agenda which was adopted by the Policy Committee in November 2003. Priorities for state action include opposing water markets, modifying maintenance dredging exemptions, adopting the Charlotte Harbor Initiative proposed by SFWMD, adopting Charlotte Harbor Research Program funding proposed by Mote Marine Laboratory, supporting water reservations, increasing environmental law enforcement, and continuing to fund environmental land acquisition and restoration. The agenda and its positions were presented to the Lee County legislative delegation. Federal priorities include funding a Programmatic EIS for Peace/Myakka basins, and supporting funding for restoration and land acquisition.

Babcock Land Acquisition Resolution 03-1

The Policy Committee adopted a position in support of acquiring the Babcock Ranch for environmental purposes. State negotiations for acquisition of the property are underway.

Mini- and Micro-Grants

Charlotte Harbor NEP offers grants to citizens who want to conduct activities that help implement the CCMP; thereby protecting local estuaries and watersheds. In 2003 nine mini-grant applications for up to \$3,000 each as well as an additional 30 micro-grant awards for up to \$250 were awarded.

Research and Restoration Partners Projects

The NEP funded 7 new projects in 2003 totaling \$123,000. The seven projects included "Biological Effects of Suspended Sediments on Shellfish," "Restoration of Bay Scallop Populations," "Spotted Seatrout as an Environmental Indicator," "Control of Invasive Grasses in the Myakka River watershed," "Tippicanoe East Exotic Species Project," "Effects of Marsh Restoration on juvenile Snook and Fish Communities," and "Eradication of Nile Monitor Lizards."

Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) and its subcommittees

This committee is made up of over 140 scientists, resource managers and planners with technical expertise. The TAC and its 3 subcommittees met 24 times in 2003. Highlights of the year included initiating 3 letters under the new NEP Advocacy and Review Procedures, preparing the scopes of service for 4 contracts, and identifying Alligator Creek (in Charlotte County) a restoration priority. The three advocacy letters were refined and approved through the management conference and

included coordinating Caloosahatchee water flows, requesting information of phosphate mine permitting, and requesting a programmatic EIS of the Peace and Myakka River basins. The four scopes of service included a project to upload Coastal Charlotte Harbor Monitoring Network data into STORET, a Hydrologic Conditions Change Analysis project, a Habitat Change Analysis project, and an Invertebrate Species Richness and Abundance study. These contracts will total \$300,000.

Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) and its subcommittees

In 2003 this volunteer committee remained a productive, dynamic group of citizens, educators and professionals. The CAC met 8 times and its subcommittees had a total of 24 meetings.

Approximately 20 people are voting members who provide the public perspective on issues addressed by the Management Conference and approximately 60 more people are active helping to implement the public information and education portions of the Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP). Accomplishments of the CAC included amending its bylaws to more closely follow Roberts Rules of Order.

Hired Grants and Contracts Manager

The first new position was approved since the establishment of the Charlotte Harbor NEP. The Grants and Contracts Manager will work with partners to obtain funding support to the partners in support of the CCMP. Liz Donley, esq., was hired for the position and quickly began preparing contracts and grant applications. The Charlotte Harbor NEP accepted responsibility for 4 contracts totaling \$387,000. The funding is from EPA Southern Coastal funds. Without the NEP it would have been difficult to transfer the funding to Lee County, FGCU, SCCF, and the Southwest Florida Watershed Council.

Grants

This year, 9 grant applications were submitted by the program office. Of these, 2 were awarded for the Project Design and Evaluation Workshop hosted by the NEP in December. One from the Blair Foundation and the other from SeaGrant, together total \$1,350. The workshop will result improved public outreach projects through the NEP Study area. Four grants totaling over \$1,000,000 for restoration projects are pending.



Restoration Planning

A partnership of the Charlotte Harbor NEP office, Estero Bay Agency on Bay Management, and the Charlotte Harbor-Caloosahatchee Restoration Coordination Team prepared a map and associated database of needed restoration projects in response to a Lee County request for a Mitigation Plan. The data are being used by the NEP, ABM, RCT, and the Southwest Florida Feasibility Study to supplement their individual restoration planning efforts. The Southwest Florida Water Management District and the Charlotte Harbor Fund is funding the Charlotte Harbor Environmental Center's Watershed Resource Center to continue the restoration plan mapping in the northern part of the NEP study area. The Big Cypress Basin RCT and Rookery Bay NERR are providing the mapping in the southern part of the Regional RCT and the Feasibility Study area. These efforts are being

coordinated with the Coastal Conservation Corridor Plan funded by the US Fish and Wildlife Service and prepared by The Nature Conservancy.

Harbor Happenings newsletter and web site

These two tools communicate to the public and others Charlotte Harbor NEP's issues of concern, accomplishments in protecting the estuaries and watersheds and activities offered to learn more. Each issue of the 12-page quarterly newsletter has been prepared with the assistance of at least 15 of the program's partners. During 2003 the number of subscribers increased from approximately 3,000 to 4,000. An additional 2,000 copies of each issue are distributed at events and by the program's partners. The program web site offers PDF copies of most Charlotte Harbor NEP documents, monitoring information, meeting information, and more detailed reports. Usage of the web site has increased similarly.



Charlotte Harbor Nature Festival

Charlotte Harbor NEP has been the main sponsor of this one-day festival for each of the last four years. Planned by a committee of volunteers, the festival offers exceptional fun opportunities to learn about the natural environment of southwest Florida through talks, guided walks and wagon rides, music, and information offered by many exhibitors who have a concern about the health of the environment. An area of the festival is

designated as a children's discovery zone. A highlight was the very long line at the Charlotte Harbor NEP booth to obtain the very popular binoculars and posters and to sign up for the newsletter.

National Estuaries Day

Drawing on the strength of the program's partners, each year the celebration of our local estuaries has become bigger and better. In 2003, 35 activities from festivals to guided walks and paddling trips to boat rides were offered to offer the public hands-on experiences to increase their understanding and concern about the local environment.

Estuaries Live

This interactive, live broadcast featured eight estuaries from around the country over the course of two days. Charlotte Harbor NEP produced one of the eight hour-long programs in 2003 (and in 2002). NOAA and EPA host this program for students and others. In 2002 an estimated one million people watched the program live. The program remains available for viewing off the Internet and VHS tapes are available, making this a valuable tool for teachers.



Volunteer Monitoring Workshop

Charlotte Harbor NEP staff worked with The Ocean Conservancy, other Florida NEPs, Charlotte Harbor Aquatic Preserve and EPA staff to organize a workshop for volunteer monitoring groups in Florida. The 2-day workshop was held in Gainesville on February 18-19 and involved both the Florida NEPs and the NERRs. Discussion focused on the types of volunteer monitoring groups in the NEP and NERR regions, ways to start and maintain such groups, data management and quality assurance issues. The workshop resulted in an effort by the State to initiate the formation of Florida Water Quality Monitoring Council. The Charlotte Harbor NEP will participate in the start-up of that Council.

Estuarine Indicators Workshop

The Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation hosted the Estuarine Indicators Workshop in October, with financial support from the Charlotte Harbor NEP among others. NEP staff gave a presentation on Charlotte Harbor seagrasses and developed a manuscript for the resulting proceedings document. The NEP presentation and manuscript compare historical and recent seagrass coverage data on a harbor-wide basis, something that has not been done for Charlotte Harbor since 1983.