CHNEP Policy Committee Meeting
Thursday, September 25, 2025, 9:30 AM – 1:00 PM
Punta Gorda Library
401 Shreve Street, Punta Gorda 33950

Policy Committee Draft Meeting Minutes

Members Present:

Elizabeth Sweigert	Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP)
Craig Hesterlee	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 4
Allie McCue	Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)
Jennifer Codo-Salisbury	Central Florida Regional Planning Council (CFRPC)
Rebekah Harp	Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council (SWFRPC)
Phil Flood (alternate)	South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD)
John Hall	Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD)
Ken Doherty	Charlotte County
Tim Stanley	Glades County
Carrie Edenfield (alternate)	Hardee County
Emory Howard	Hendry County
Scott Kirouac	Highlands County
Lisa Kreiger (alternate)	Lee County
John Bohde (alternate)	Polk County
Keith Keene	City of Arcadia
Kyle Lasek (alternate)	City of Bartow
Joe Kilraine	City of Cape Coral
Petrina McCutchen	City of Fort Meade
David Duval (alternate)	City of North Port
Debbie Lux (alternate)	City of Punta Gorda
Mike Miller	City of Sanibel
Tracy Mercer	City of Winter Haven
John King	Town of Fort Myers Beach
Jeff Hunt	Village of Estero
Melynda Brown	CHNEP Management Committee Co-Chair

Others Present:

Jennifer Hecker	Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP)
Nicole Iadevaia	Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP)
Keara Abel	Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP)
Felicia Burks	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 4
Noemi Mercado	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 4
Randy Smith	Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD)
Ana Carolina Coelho Maran, Ph.D.	South Florida Water Management District
Amy Wicks	Wicks Consulting Group

Agenda Item #1 — Call to Order and Introductions — Elizabeth Sweigert, Co-Chair

Policy Committee Co-Chair Elizabeth Sweigert called the meeting to order at 9:34 am. Introductions were then made.

Agenda Item #2 — Agenda Additions or Deletions — Elizabeth Sweigert, Co-Chair

No additions or deletions were made to the agenda.

JOE KILRAINE MOVED, SECONDED BY SCOTT KIROUAC, TO APPROVE AGENDA WITHOUT ANY ADDITIONS OR DELETIONS. THE MOTION WAS UNANIMOUSLY APPROVED WITH NO FURTHER DISCUSSION.

Agenda Item #3 — Public Comments on Agenda Items — Elizabeth Sweigert, Co-Chair

No public comments on agenda items were made.

Agenda Item #4 — Management Committee Report — Melynda Brown, Management Committee Co-Chair

Melynda Brown, Management Committee Co-Chair, provided a briefing from the last Management Committee Meeting held on September 5th, 2025. Highlights are as follows:

The Management Committee convened on September 5, 2025, chaired by Co-Chair Jamie Wolanin, to discuss various environmental initiatives and challenges facing the region. The meeting featured presentations from the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) that highlighted critical projects including the Charlotte Harbor Algae Working Group's strategies for managing harmful algae, habitat restoration efforts led by the Southwest Florida Estuarine Restoration Team, Big Waters Land Trust on their new Strategic Conservation Plan which is centered around land and habitat restoration, and the City of Sanibel's Surface Water Management Plan aimed at enhancing flood management infrastructure. These presentations emphasized the importance of collaborative efforts in addressing ecological issues and the need for community engagement. In addition to the presentations, the TAC engaged in a discussion regarding the improvement of water quality data collection, particularly in the wake of hurricanes. Key initiatives included establishing a communication network for partners, standardizing post-storm data protocols, and creating a GIS map for resource sharing during emergencies. These efforts aim to bolster resilience and collaboration among stakeholders, ensuring effective water quality management in the face of increasing storm frequency and intensity. The Management Committee also received updates on the Comprehensive Conservation Management Plan (CCMP) from the Citizen's Advisory Committee and reviewed the amended FY26 Work Plan and Budget. Dr. Carolina Maran presented on the rising frequency of extreme rainfall events, prompting discussions on rainfall distribution and potential causal factors. Furthermore, Amy Wicks proposed strategies for flood-proofing communities, advocating for sustainable development integration and innovative incentives. There were no Policy Committee comments or questions.

Agenda Item #5 — CHNEP Update — Jennifer Hecker, CHNEP Executive Director

CHNEP's Executive Director, Ms. Jennifer Hecker, presented on programmatic activity occurring since the last Policy Committee meeting. Highlights are as follows:

For the Program Evaluation, CHNEP submitted the 49-page CHNEP 2020-2024 CHNEP Program Evaluation Report and supporting documents, organized and conducted two days of project site visits with local partners as well as EPA evaluation team members and sent follow up emails and photos to all attendees. The final letter awarded highest "Proficient" rating, stating CHNEP continues to be eligible for federal funding through EPA. Some key takeaways from the award level were that "The (CHNEP) Water Atlas offers an example and inspiration to other local NEPs," "The Management Conference's ability to anticipate, regroup and re-envision a path forward, including efforts to finalize the 2025 CHNEP CCMP, is impressive and reflective of decisive leadership and guidance, including talented, committed NEP staff," "The CHNEP continues to create healthy ecosystems by coordinating partners' efforts around habitat protection." as well as "supporting clean waters through its collaboration with multi-jurisdictional organizations," and

"The CHNEP should celebrate its growth and success…" Final editing and design of the CCMP was completed and can be viewed online. CHNEP Welcomed 4 new Policy Committee members, Craig Hesterlee representing EPA Region 4, Commissioner Barbara Langdon representing the City of North Port, Councilmember Lloyd Weed representing the City of Venice, and Councilmember Jeff Hunt representing the Village of Estero. CHNEP also completed available Programmatic Appropriations Forms for FY26 federal finding and remitted them for consideration.

For finance and grants, CHNEP submitted FY25 FDEP Grant SD016 quarter 2 report and attachments, submitted EPA CE-02D41623-3 Section 320 Midyear Progress Report and attachments, submitted EPA 4T-02D4123-2 IIJA Midyear Progress Report and attachments, submitted Upper CCHMN Quarter 2 and 3 reports and field data deliverables to Southwest Florida Water Management District, and compiled all approved habitat projects submitted to NEPORT in FY24 to produce the FY24 Annual GPRA NEPORT Report and provided to FDEP in grant. CHNEP staff attended numerous partnership meetings since last cycle. CHNEP staff presented on *the CHNEP Water Atlas 2.0* at the CAC meeting, presented *The Health of Our Waters* at the Barrier Island Parks Society Marine Pollution Forum, presented on the *Lower Charlotte Harbor Flatwoods Initiative and Coastal Charlotte Harbor Monitoring Network Programs* during the EPA Program Evaluation Site Visit, presented *A Regional Approach to Restore and Manage Water* to talk about alignment between the work of the NEPs on natural resources and flood management in the built environment at the Annual Florida Floodplain Managers Association 2025 Annual Conference, provided *CHNEP Water Atlas Training* to the Calusa Waterkeeper Rangers in-person and online which included an in-depth overview of the data and analyses available on waterbody pages and interactive maps, as well as step-by-step instructions on how to download data from the Atlas, and recorded 4 tutorial videos on how to use the CHNEP Water Atlas which focused on topics including the home page and how to find a waterbody, waterbody pages, maps and data, and how to download data (which can accessed on the CHNEP YouTube channel under the CHNEP Water Atlas Tutorials Playlist).

For outreach events, CHNEP staff attended the Englewood Earth Day Festival, discussing how to protect natural resources, distributing CHNEP publications and making native wildflower seed bombs with over 170 visitors, attended the Ding Darling Conservation Carnival in Ft. Myers where staff interacted and conservation discussions with over 200 guests, and launched the 2026 Annual Nature Calendar Photo Contest and held a photo selection meeting with members of the CAC (design is now underway for the 2026 CHNEP Nature Calendar). CHNEP staff created a NEP informational handout highlighting national assets that the National Estuary Program helps to protect, for federal policymaker education, and created CHNEP 30th Anniversary video, including associated maps. In the press and media, CHNEP contributed to "Sprinkle list: $10M flows from Senate to Caloosahatchee basin," "Alligator Alley trail at Circle B reopens after 8-month closure from Hurricane Milton damage," "GAMIFY LEARNING: Carnival fun teaches conservation at Lakes Park Earth Day event," "Commissioners support NOAA tidal gauge project," and "Sarasota Bay's sea grass population soars; setting benchmark for other marine reclamation efforts" – WGCU PBS & NPR for Southwest Florida. Finally, on September 16th & 17th at the Sunseeker Resort in Port Charlotte, CHNEP is hosting the 2025 Southwest Florida Resiliency Summit which is co-located and being done immediately prior to Florida Resiliency Conference. Registration is currently open with CEUs available. Top scientists and experts on resiliency will be presenting and it is open to the public with questions and answer sessions and networking breaks. CHNEP has 17 new Facebook followers for a total of 2,035 with 7 new "likes" (1,700 total likes), 5,809 subscribers for the educational mailings, 2,079 unique visitors and 2,869 page visits to the CHNEP website, 15,241 YouTube views with 99 subscribers and 336 videos, and 632 total Instagram followers. There were no Policy Committee comments or questions.

Agenda Item #6 — Consent Agenda. Elizabeth Sweigert, Co-Chair & Jennifer Hecker, CHNEP Executive Co-Chair

The Consent Agenda outlined several key items for approval by the CHNEP Policy Committee, including the May 22nd, 2025 Policy Committee meeting minutes, an amended fiscal year 2026 Master Work Plan and Budget, state and federal legislative priorities, and the CHNEP's Executive Director Jennifer Hecker's evaluation. Amendments in the FY26 Master Work Plan and Budget included adjustments to funding levels, the removal of specific projects, and an increase in budget for upcoming events such as the Watershed Summit and Resiliency Summit. The budget revisions illustrate a shift in funding support from SWFWMD and the reallocation of resources to prioritize essential projects like the Water Atlas Improvements. These revisions were unanimously approved for recommendation by the Management Committee at their last meeting. Additionally, the agenda proposed state and federal legislative priorities aimed at enhancing environmental protection, supporting estuary restoration, and advocating for increased funding for conservation initiatives. These priorities mirrored 2025's approved CHNEP legislative priorities. The CHNEP Executive Director, Jennifer Hecker's annual evaluation is mandated by the US EPA and Charlotte County's Human Resource Division. A draft evaluation was compiled from ten responses submitted by Policy Committee members, with scores averaged across categories such as communication, leadership, and operations. Overall, the evaluation reflects strong performance, with an average score of approximately 4.8 to 4.9 across various metrics.

A member commented that the overall average on the Executive Director's evaluation is an indication of how well Ms. Hecker and her team successfully handle all of CHNEP's responsibilities.

PHIL FLOOD MOVED, SECONDED BY EMORY HOWARD, TO APPROVE THE CONSENT AGENDA. THE MOTION WAS UNANINMOUSLY APPROVED WITH NO FURTHER DISCUSSION.

Agenda Item #7 — Extreme Rainfall Events on the Rise — Ana Carolina Coelho Maran, Ph.D., South Florida Water Management District

Ana Carolina Coelho Maran, Ph.D., from the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD), provided the Committee updates on SFWMD's the cutting-edge modeling and the ramping up of both operational and structural flood control mechanisms. Highlights are as follows:

The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD), established in 1949, plays a crucial role in managing the water resources and ecosystems across a vast area of 16 counties in Florida, serving approximately 9.5 million residents. It is the oldest and largest of the state's five water management districts, overseeing an extensive network of canals, levees, pump stations, and water control structures. The SFWMD's mission focuses on safeguarding water resources, protecting against flooding, and ensuring the region's water needs are met while engaging with the public and stakeholders. This comprehensive management is vital given the unique environmental challenges faced by South Florida due to its geography and climate. Preparedness and emergency management are key components of the SFWMD's operations. The organization maintains a year-round readiness plan to respond to extreme weather events, such as hurricanes and heavy rainfall. Utilizing real-time data, the SFWMD implements strategies like pre-storm drawdowns to lower canal levels and coordinates with local drainage districts to manage water flow effectively during severe weather. The in-house Emergency Operations Center facilitates collaboration with partner agencies, ensuring a swift and organized response to flooding or drought conditions. This proactive approach is essential for minimizing potential damage to communities and ecosystems. In addressing future rainfall trends, the SFWMD is investing in both short-term and long-term strategies to enhance its understanding of rainfall patterns influenced by climate change. Recent workshops have focused on developing regional climate models tailored to Florida's specific

weather phenomena, including tropical storms and local sea breezes. The SFWMD also offers a web application that provides projections of extreme rainfall changes across its jurisdiction, aiding resilience planning efforts. These initiatives are supported by state programs aimed at assessing and addressing flooding and sea level rise. The implications of the SFWMD's work extend beyond immediate water management; they contribute to broader regional resilience amid climate change challenges. Initiatives like the "Always Ready Bill" and partnerships with the Florida Flood Hub emphasize a collective effort to establish scientific frameworks for long-term planning. The ongoing development of a Statewide Flood Vulnerability Assessment further highlights the importance of integrating data and collaborative strategies to address the complex interplay between water management and climate resilience. SFWMD represents a critical framework for addressing the region's water management challenges while preparing for the impacts of climate change. Through proactive emergency preparedness, innovative rainfall projections, and collaborative resilience planning, the SFWMD aims to safeguard water resources and enhance community protection against flooding and drought. As it continues to implement strategic projects and secure funding, the SFWMD's efforts will be vital in shaping a sustainable future for South Florida's ecosystems and its residents.

One member asked if there was any update on the Lake Okeechobee Component A Reservoir project (LOCAR) and if that project were to come to fruition whether it would provide a better ability to manage draw downs and recharge efforts. Dr. Maran said that the answer to the second part of the question was "yes" because any reservoir or any storage project that is currently underway has the goal of storing water and then to use this water when the levels in the system are low overall. The LOCAR is one project and there are a few other projects where SFWMD is heavily investing in storage in general and with different purposes, mainly ecosystem restoration but also to assist in supporting the offset of those conditions that might be seen in the future. SFWMD continues to advance those important project steps that need to be completed. Another member asked when SFWMD, after looking at the additional rainfall situation statewide, and the five districts and DOT (Department of Transportation) will have the information available for the design community to be able to start designing projects in the future that have adequate storage for this additional water management challenge ahead. Dr. Maran said that this specific project is a three-year project so in about 2 to 2 1/2 years' time, data should be available. The current numbers are more for planning purposes and large-scale floatability assessments and are not specifically translated to design requirements. There is uncertainty when stepping towards those needs from a design perspective, even though the engineers ask for more certainty. It is hard to navigate this area of how big to build knowing that there is so much uncertainty today. Dr. Maran said that this is why she believes that the five management districts and DOT are investing in this so that the data can be captured not only for planning purposes but for design as well. SFWMD will continue to work closely with the project team to make sure those tasks are moving forward because this is important for SFWMD and for many other agencies in this state and in local governments.

Agenda Item #8 — Planning to Flood-Proof Your Community from Future Flooding — Amy Wicks, Wicks Consulting

Amy Wicks from the Wicks Consulting Group presented on the insights that came from the design and engineering of the Babcock Ranch community, which include lessons learned , challenges, successes, and recommendations to other communities wishing to reduce or prevent flooding. Highlights are as follows:

Flooding poses significant challenges to urban development in Florida, particularly due to the state's high number of repetitive loss properties that experience frequent flooding. Hurricanes such as Charley, Irma, Ian, Helene, and Milton, which struck Florida with considerable intensity, have highlighted the need for enhanced flood-proof planning in the face of climate change. These storms have effectively served as stress tests, revealing vulnerabilities in existing infrastructure and emphasizing the urgency for resilient design strategies to safeguard communities against future

flooding. Babcock Ranch exemplifies a forward-thinking approach to urban planning, integrating sustainability and resilience as foundational principles. Located in Southwest Florida, this master-planned community incorporates natural drainage patterns, smart stormwater management, and flood-friendly designs to enhance its resilience. Innovative engineering ensures that roads are designed to manage floodwaters effectively, protecting homes and critical infrastructure during storms. Importantly, essential services are built at elevated levels, maintaining accessibility during extreme weather events. This strategic integration of land use and environmental stewardship has proven effective, as evidenced by the absence of flooded homes during recent hurricanes. The development of Babcock Ranch illustrates the importance of collaboration among engineers, planners, and landscape architects to design systems that mimic natural hydrology. While challenges such as regulatory navigation and community trust-building exist, the project demonstrates the long-term benefits of investing in resilient infrastructure. By adapting flood-friendly strategies to various urban settings and remaining responsive to evolving climatic conditions, Babcock Ranch serves as a model for future developments aimed at mitigating the impacts of flooding in vulnerable areas.

One member asked if the canal that Babcock Ranch uses to help with overflow from the Caloosahatchee was part of the project or an existing canal. Ms. Wicks stated that it is an existing canal and was ditched prior to 1940 based on aerials views; they have tried to fill in any ditches that didn't exist in 1940 so that they operate more naturally. Another member said that there is a community east of the Babcock Ranch development where people broke it up and sold it as tracts of land and it is experiencing so much flooding because there is no drainage – all-natural flow; the marshes are all full of dead trees and the water just doesn't run out. He said that he wonders what a solution might look like or if it can be fixed because people are already living there. Ms. Wicks said that west of State Road 31, right along the western border of Babcock Ranch, there is flooding. Babcock Ranch has also flooded State Road 31 two weeks prior to Hurricane Irma and that because of Irma, Babcock Ranch only received two inches of rain whereas Cape Coral received 18 inches. Regarding interconnectivity, Southwest Florida is incredibly flat, so water got so backed up in Cape Coral that water came under (Interstate) 75 and all the way over the top of State Road 31 and was pouring off because it got 18 inches in 3 days, and it had nowhere to go. Ms. Wicks said that her team had recent discussions about how almost anything can impact and change drainage patterns. Another member said that based on the presentation, the developers of Babcock Ranch could have developed more of that acreage if they wanted to, but they chose not to using forward thinking, and that forward thinking now has also turned into marketing that's driven by data that shows the results that Babcock Ranch has experienced versus so many other areas in Florida. He also said that this must be paying dividends especially with the recent pattern of storms. Ms. Wicks said that they had the option to develop even more, but they chose not to. In today's world, most developers want to develop as much property as they possibly can. Babcock Ranch started with the vision of sustainability, and after about 3 years in, there were discussions about whether it was storm safe and it was presented as a challenge. Ms. Wicks said that she went back to college and started studying ecological systems, after which she started pulling that information in. Another member asked whether the ponds that are up and running now have been in operation the whole time. Ms. Wicks said that the ponds are monitored so that they can "talk" to each other. Ponds are required to be connected to at least two other ponds, and it is like an electric grid system. The member said that it was interesting that the engineers believed that what they were doing would work because as Dr. Maran's presentation showed experts in water management do not necessarily know how to anticipate and there is always speculation. The member also stated that if Babcock Ranch drops its ponds before an event, it is potentially a big risk that there may be significant negative impacts if there is a miscalculation downstream or to its wetlands. Ms. Wicks said that they know the timing as to how long it gets to the tidal Caloosahatchee and there are also downstream gauges. If there is a break point for some reason that wasn't anticipated and the discharge is suddenly 36 cfs downstream, it can be flipped off. Every thousand feet, there is a

gauge, and it will show if something unpredictable occurs so that it can be shut immediately. As far as the wetlands, if the controls elevation is 26, it can be raised to 27. It will have to be operated on a regular basis so that it doesn't go over 27 but this provides a foot of extra free board as everything is being stored higher. If it is lowered to 25.5 ahead of the storm, the hydro period has been built over time and it can be rebuilt up again afterwards. This was the offer to alleviate concerns over the wetlands. The member then said that flood control is somewhat counter to water quality treatment, you are trying to get rid of water rather than attenuating and treating it; she said that she can understand why agencies would be asking the questions because it sounds like a great idea, but there are also downstream impacts. Like every other community, Babcock Ranch has an impact on neighboring communities that aren't designed to the same standard because it is a new development. Ms. Wicks stated that from the water quality standpoint, Babcock Ranch is holding more water so there is 90% of attenuation. The operations agreement is that it will not operate if there is any forecasted rainfall in the next three days with more than 30% certainty. That gives them a three day hold no matter what because it would have been discharging as soon as it started to rain so when it is going to rain, they are completely closed. If they can raise the weirs, they will be holding that water during the wet season. Babcock Ranch does monitor water quality at 8 locations. Another member asked if Ms. Wicks found that storm surge is more prevalent in conversations with her clients/potential clients because further inland may not experience the actual storm surge itself but will be impacted by the drainage such as with Hurricane Ian and the Peace River and Arcadia, and after Irma with the Caloosahatchee staying high for days. Ms. Wicks said that surge is discussed with clients in Georgia, South Carolina and New Jersey, but surprisingly less in Southwest Florida where development is focused largely in doing quickly and cheaply. Ms. Wicks said she sees this more with clients versus municipalities who seem more open to work on the problem. There is also pushback from developers who are reluctant to add what they perceive as costly inconsequential features.

Agenda Item #9 — CHNEP Technical Projects Updates and New Tools — Nicole Iadevaia, CHNEP

Nicole Iadevaia, CHNEP's Director of Research and Restoration, provided the committee with a brief overview on project progress since the previous Management Committee meeting. Highlights are as follows:

The CHNEP Water Atlas has new Basin pages presented with associated Minimum Flows and Levels (MFL), HRN and habitat evolution model results, annual rainfall totals, land/use land cover maps, economic valuation reports, and relevant CHNEP project information. The SCCF River, Estuary, and Coastal Observing Network (RECON) water quality data is presented on the Real-Time Data Mapper. A "Download Data for this Waterbody" button has been added to waterbody pages. For the Coastal Charlotte Harbor Monitoring Network (CCHMN), Q3 data has been collected and submitted and the Q4 data collection almost completed. The CCHMN Annual Audits and meeting took place at the end of August. Results were discussed along with lessons learned and water trend analyses. Also discussed and shared were what updates, adjustments and changes that may need to be made. CHNEP staff created fact sheets and infographics to share results from CCHMN trend analysis published in an article in Estuaries and Coast scientific journal (ESCO), *Water Quality Trends and Eutrophication Indicators in a Large Subtropical Estuary: A Case Study of the Greater Charlotte Harbor System in Southwest Florida*. For Highlands, Hardee and DeSoto County CVAs, these projects are in partnership with the Central Florida Regional Planning Council (CFRPC) and will identify Adaptation Action Areas for each county based on data gathered for vulnerability assessments. Final critical assets list, exposure, and sensitivity analyses will also be used to identify and prioritize Adaptation Action Areas. The methodology for prioritizing critical assets and flood exposure has been developed and approved by counties. The final product will be lists of projects, designs and costs in top 3 adaptation action areas for each County. The project pages for County vulnerability assessments are created on CHNEP website

and include interactive maps created by the CFRPC. For Polk County , this project is also in partnership with CFRPC to conduct additional rainfall flood modeling for Polk County's Vulnerability Assessment. This will Include 200/500-year, and compound flooding events and create a visual interpretation of the flooding events for community outreach. The HEC-RAS model was used for additional flood scenarios and is the preferred method used by FEMA, USACE, and other regulatory agencies for flood hazard mapping and mitigation planning. Model results were used to select priority areas in the County to create a visual interpretation of model results. In Charlotte County, the project is to conduct baseline Vulnerability Assessment with Charlotte County. The first public meeting was held in the spring, and the second one took place in August. Critically significant asset data was aggregated and mapped, and the metadata has been standardized to meet state requirements. An 'Existing Data/Model Tools Sufficiency Analysis' was conducted to identify data needs for this project and future projects. Modeling of exposure & sensitivity/risk analysis for critical assets under different flood scenarios was conducted, and adaptation focus areas were identified.

Some statistics of seagrass loss in CHNEP estuaries are Dona & Roberts Bays – there was a loss of 71 acres between 2018 and 2024, with seagrass coverage reaching an all-time historic low in 2022 with only 34 acres; these Bays gained 15 acres between 2022 and 2024 to total 49 acres, though it was still not near 2018 levels. In Charlotte Harbor, there was a loss of 4,657 acres of seagrass between 2018 and 2024, with coverage at all-time historic low in 2024. In the Tidal Caloosahatchee, there was a loss of 333 acres of seagrass between 2014 and 2021. Updated charts and maps will soon be available on the CHNEP Water Atlas Seagrass pages. CHNEP also produces updated fact sheets on Basin Water Quality and State & Federal research and restoration funding opportunities which can be found on the CHNEP website Resources page.

One member asked why Charlotte Harbor's loss of seagrass was the worst and Ms. Iadevaia said that losses of seagrass were documented across all the areas starting in 2018 after Hurricane Irma There was a large red tide event after Irma which resulted in a large macroalgae bloom that smothered the seagrass in those areas and caused it to sink to the bottom. After Irma, the area continued to see large storm events. If there is a sustained break from the storms this might allow for the seagrass to recover. Also, how nutrients are managed should be analyzed to deal with the loss and to ensure that these systems/ecosystems are resilient/can recover more quickly because storms cannot be prevented. Ms. Iadevaia mentioned CHNEP's seagrass loss presentation on the YouTube channel and Ms. Hecker said that CHNEP published a water quality trends paper which looked at decades of water quality data and that nitrogen is becoming increasingly elevated in many cases over the state standards throughout the estuaries in the CHNEP area. This nitrogen promotes macroalgae growth – smothering seagrass - which has led to manatees dying of starvation. Sarasota Bay has made structural upgrades which have curtailed the loss in Sarasota Bay where it is going in the opposite direction and starting to recover. Seagrass is a foundation of the aquatic ecosystem, and the loss will impact not just manatees but everything in between such as crabs, fish, etc. Another member commented that living in North Port or Charlotte County, the Caloosahatchee River under high flow conditions is responsible for much of the nitrogen that creates the macroalgae growth.

Agenda Item #10 — Policy Committee Member Updates — Elizabeth Sweigert, Co-Chair

Phil Flood (SFWMD): At the end of July, the C-43 reservoir was completed. It is an 18-mile reservoir which will be a cornerstone of fixing the estuary. It was designed exclusively to capture and treat the water and to improve the health of the Caloosahatchee River. We recently broke ground on the Lake Hicpochee hydrological enhancement project. This is Phase 2 which is about a one square mile shallow reservoir that captures large agricultural runoff, runs it through the shallow reservoir with some plants in it that would pull some nutrients out of it. It cleans some of the water that goes into the Caloosahatchee. This project will add another 25 acres which will

greatly expand it, and it also adds a second pump station where the water can now be pulled out of the Caloosahatchee and not just rely on when there's water coming down the canal. The water runs up through the flow equalization basins and back across the marsh again which adds more storage and offers a lot more treatment. We recently closed a solicitation that we had looking for landowners to partner with us to do water storage projects. There were three responses, and staff are currently evaluating those. If those are good, the board will likely be considering funding those three projects.

Rebekah Harp (SWFRPC): The Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council is hosting a Regional Forum on Friday, October 24th at 9 a.m. At the Charlotte Harbor Event Center. This is in coordination with the Central Florida, East Central and Tampa Bay RPCs. We are looking at gathering priorities in the region/regional resiliency. This will eventually go into our strategic action plan which is funded by FDEP.

Jennifer Codo-Salisbury (CFRPC): We hope that the partners can participate in the Forum, from the coastlines to the heartlands. We all are interrelated, and we are looking at that conversation of so many of the pillars – balance, growth, development and natural resources - all those aspects that go together. The CFRPC is thankful for the partnership with CHNEP and the vulnerability assessment. The adaptation action area plans take those vulnerability assessments to the next step. After the vulnerability assessment is finished, there are identified priority areas, and we must do additional studies. The opportunity that CHNEP brought forward to our counties is tremendous because they will be meaningful projects that they can immediately go to funding for. Also, thank you so much for the information on Babcock Ranch. We will be reaching out to you as that certainly is a model for all of us.

Keith Keene (Arcadia): We continue with our sewer collection system in our water distribution system improvements. It was an over $15 million project. FDEP with the state revolving fund has helped with 90% forgiveness. North of Highway 70, there are several north-south streets that were never paved in a community. This has caused issues with transportation, traffic flow, as well as building on the lots that are available along there. We have undertaken paving Maple Street and 12th Avenue that included adding a brand-new lift station for that area. This area was served by septic, so it will remove some of the septic eventually. This was something that the council identified several years ago to use ARPA funds for. We are doing a stormwater and flood control project with Jordan Branch. This has turned into an almost $5 million project and will be funded by the Florida Department of Commerce. There is almost 8,000 linear feet and it goes under Highway 17, just north of town. There will be two new box culverts installed and the small pipes that drain this branch into the Peace River will be replaced with a 48-inch concrete culvert. Flooding has always been an issue. We are also going to be constructing our wetland infiltration basin that is part of our wastewater treatment system upgrade. That is a $4.5 million project. FDEP is helping with $3.5 million. The replacement of our wastewater treatment plant is going to take some time, and it is about a $51 million project right now which will probably end up closer to $80 million. Gibson Street - one of our main streets on the north side of town – serves the elementary school, the middle school, the high school and the brand-new high school. There are stormwater improvements in a widening project there. A couple of things that came out of our R2P2 program after Hurricane Ian is that along with FEMA and EPA, we did some brainstorming and came up with some projects and we are asking the Legislature for some assistance. One is downtown Arcadia which doesn't take that much rain for it to flood. After the town burned down about 1905, they did not make the street wider or back up their replacement buildings. From the R2P2 was a pervious opportunity to provide some rain gardens to collect water which can be used while improving the drainage at the same time. It will cost about $500,000. Going east on 17 continues to be a challenge. It will be a three-year project, completed in 2027 (versus early 2026). They are doing a thorough job that includes our wastewater lines being changed out and providing some stormwater improvements as well.

Tim Stanley (Glades County): We are seeing more rainfall every year. It used to be that places would flood once every six years, now it's every summer. Lake Hicpochee is in our county, and we took 25 acres of cane out of production. We are working on trying to expand our sewer (system) and we are looking for funding. At the north end of Lake Okeechobee, we have a couple of communities that are all on septic tanks. We are small and we can't compete. When we go to ask the Legislature for money, they want to give it to the bigger counties and cities because they can get more houses developed. We have a lot of waterfront property that needs to be on a sewer plant. A study came out and said that Lake Okeechobee is the dirtiest lake in the United States and our newspaper determined that they do not analyze every lake in the U.S. They took the top six and looked at the phosphorus, nitrogen, etc. and some of the lakes didn't even have those numbers. So many studies have been done on Lake Okeechobee and they had all the information already. Other lakes were dirtier and different, but they chose to focus on phosphorus as their number one priority. It may not have been a fair assessment. The rebuttal indicated that the study identified that ice skating is considered one of the activities available on the Lake which highlights one of the inaccuracies.

Emory Howard (Hendry County): As the vulnerability assessment moves forward, if there are any difficulties that you run into, I would appreciate it if you would contact me so that I can intervene and resolve any issues.

David Duval (North Port): Money is the biggest issue for North Port which we need for everything. We recently started our Price Boulevard widening project which has been discussed for 20 years. The cost went from $5 million to about $94 million. Included in that is during Hurricanes Ian and Milton, at least three of our bridges on Price Boulevard that were not expected to have any problems had washouts around the bridges. The plan has changed, and we are now replacing those bridges. Instead of using the swales for drainage, there is going to be piping for drainage. Those new bridges are going to incorporate larger concrete box-type drainage to help with flooding in different parts of the city. Also, we received a consent letter from FDEP during one of the big rain events that indicated that our water run-off overflowed our capacity. Some of the treated water which was supposed to go into the injection wells made it down to the Myakka River. We asked our voters for a $17 million tax increase for that, and the voters said "no." North Port is a growing town and for a town to be viable, it needs to be about 30% commercial. North Port is currently 8% commercial. People living in single family houses don't pay enough in taxes as compared to commercial properties and nobody wants their taxes raised.

Ken Doherty (Charlotte County): We are still moving forward on our 20-year plan of septic to sewer. Financing is an issue. We did thank the state for some appropriations that the county received last session. As for our water reclamation facilities, the East Port plant, which increased the capacity from 6 mgd to 9, is going well. It is the biggest of our four plants and it serves all our customers between the Peace River and the Myakka. It has advanced wastewater treatment as part of that project. We had to halt the Burnt Store facility. Based on the engineer's opinion, a probable cost for that water reclamation facility would be approximately $90 million and the low bid came in at $107 million. I made the motion to reject that bid and start over. With money an issue, completing projects without help is virtually impossible. We still have about $100 million owed to us from FEMA for Hurricane Ian. There are discussions going on in Tallahassee right now relative to our revenues.

Lisa Kreiger (Lee County): We have just completed the process of budget approval and the budget for FY26 was passed. One of the topics focused on was the Conservation 20/20 which is Lee County's environmentally sensitive land acquisition and management program. There have been discussions about not funding that program to levels that it had been funded in previous years. The county has had it for years and the Commission stated that if there is a great piece of property that's going to come up as a potential acquisition for conservation, they will find the funding for it. They receive many nominations for properties but some of them are less valuable and small. If there is

an opportunity for something like Larry Kiker or Bob Janes Preserves, something with value for conservation, they will find the funding. Lee County has also been dealing with the first draft from the FDEP, which indicates that the Fecal Indicator Bacteria TMDLs are coming through the Everglades West Coast Basin. This first draft came out in 2022, and we had been involved and had great conversations with the FDEP. They have improved a lot of things for the bacteria, but we still have some questions about methodology. There will be another public meeting in a couple of weeks, and we can submit more comments. As for Lake Okeechobee operations, Lee County has been very supportive of the Army Corps of Engineers going into Lake Okeechobee recovery operations. The lake seems to be doing better because of the reduction in water levels. There hasn't been a drop of water coming out of the S77 structure on the lakeside for many weeks. We are getting plenty of water naturally, from the lake to the estuary, just from rainfall. The Caloosahatchee is also doing okay. No water has been coming out of the lake. It is holding steady with the gate shut on both sides and hopefully it will get some water going into the next dry season. It was 13.21 yesterday. We participated in the Florida Wildlife Corridor "Mind the Gaps" Workshop. That group is trying to coordinate with locals and are having multiple meetings around the state of Florida to discuss where there's an opportunity, where was the nexus, what might be developed, what's not developed, what local stakeholders are working on, etc. Also, where there may be lands that they can be attached together that they are not aware of. The Corridor people are looking for new opportunities. The County Coalition, which is made up of all the counties that participate with SFWMD and the managing of Lake Okeechobee and the surrounding waterways, are planning on sending some of the commissioners that sit on that coalition to Washington, DC at the end of October to try to meet with some legislators to try to advocate for Lake Okeechobee, the Caloosahatchee, Saint Lucy, the surrounding waterways, Everglades issues, and anything else that may be of importance to water management and environmental issues in South Florida.

Elizabeth Sweigert (FDEP): If there is anything you are looking for from the Department of Environmental Protection, I will be the point of contact and will link you up with the right person.

Craig Hesterlee (EPA): I will be working with this NEP as a senior management advisor along with Felicia Burks. I was interested in Amy Wicks mentioning the potential for water quality credit trading with some of these projects. I am also interested in hearing more about some of the work that you are planning on doing around the Southeast Georgia region. As for the 30-year anniversary, it is very difficult to keep a group with such diverse interests together like this for so long and CHNEP does an incredible job. EPA is committed to CHNEP as one of our foundational NEPs that has a proven track record of success. I am here to help discuss and take questions on any federal funding updates, notices, and initiatives. If you have questions about federal regulations that may think impact your community, I am here to help answer those as they pertain to the Clean Water Act. We do and will continue to work closely with the FDEP.

Scott Kirouac (Highlands County): We were fortunate to get about a $1.2 million appropriation this last Legislature session to do some storm water work. We've also been able to do some things in certain areas with not a lot of money and provide some relief to those areas. We have been able to relieve some choke points and move an additional amount of water. It is not a permanent fix, but we have seen some success. When it comes to appropriations, it can be very difficult to compete against the bigger counties. For the first time, Highlands County has retained a lobbyist to represent its interests in Tallahassee. It makes a difference in funding when you have representation. We will have a ballot initiative to see if our citizens and voters want to implement a self-tax for some conservation funding because our Conservation Trust Fund does not produce an adequate amount of funds in today's world with land prices. Our Natural Resource Advisory Committee is still working on that initiative to potentially put it on the ballot in 2026.

Tracy Mercer (Winter Haven): I brought our Lakes Management Annual Report for the Committee. It is a report on the 30 lakes. There are about 50 lakes that either touch or are within

the city and it's called “a chain of lakes.” These lakes are connected by canals that were built back in the 30s and 40s. We have a lot of large projects on the water within the City. We are trying to meet advanced wastewater treatment standards, and it is about $98 million for one wastewater treatment plant. We have two properties. The one that is environmental is trying to meet some of those stormwater environmental parts. The one that Amy (Wicks) is working with had some difficulty and now they are moving on that. We do have a representative in Tallahassee and between the state and federal, we were getting quite a few grants.

Deborah Lux (Punta Gorda): We are a small community that is on the water, an estuary and it is very shallow. We have a lot of king tides and a lot of issues with flooding. We were hit hard recently. We just did approve a comprehensive downtown study phase one, and it was a lot more money than expected. We just approved a $200 million increase for our utilities because we need to have new water meters. We must do an addition to our ROs and the well field, so we had to increase our utility rates. I would love to learn more about Babcock Ranch. I don't know if there's anything feasible with our mostly built-out community on the water to do anything to try to help our residents. Funding is also an issue for our City. Education on these issues help us to make good decisions for our community.

Allie McCue (FWC): We have an upcoming commission meeting - one of our 4 yearly meetings - the first week of November. The agenda is still in draft. We do plan on having an update on Lake Okeechobee. We are also working on a spotted sea trout management plan. This is going to be a regional approach. FWC has taken a landscape scale approach to a lot of the work that we're doing and taking that down to the species management level. There have been some recent workshops on spotted sea trout that we posted in the area. We will take all that information, synthesize it and bring it to a vote for finalizing before our commissioners. We are continuing our C3 initiative and that is to connect, collaborate, and conserve. We take a prioritization tool and identify areas of highest priority within our five regions. For the southwest region that is located within Lee and Charlotte County, it is a geographic footprint that we call the Charlotte Harbor Flatwoods. Within all our different divisions and offices within the agency we continue to focus on that geographic area as the highest priority, whether that is through habitat management on Babcock Webb and Yucca Pens basic plant removal, or private lands assistance. A lot of our focus is on that geographic footprint with the hope of moving that conservation needle towards the positive.

Carrie Edenfield (Hardee County): Finance is the issue, and it is not just whether you receive the funds, it is also convincing your commissioners that you need to use them for these projects. They are finally making some repairs to the berm on the Peace River. FEMA gave them the funds that were due from Ian. We just approved a request to Florida Commerce under the Rebuild Program for a $1.9 million grant to remove waterway debris from the Peace River within the county.

Petrina McCutchen (Fort Meade): The meeting has been very informative. It's my first time attending, and I learned a lot of helpful information. We just went through upgrading our sewer and water system thanks to the appropriations that we did receive a couple years ago. We are on the tail end of completing that project upwards to almost $800,000. As a result we are also able to build a new lift station as well to anticipate growth that is coming into our city. We don't really have a lot of flooding issues. We only have one area that seems to have been somewhat of an issue and that's on Highway 17. We are working with DOT on trying to figure out a way to fix that.

John King (Fort Myers Beach): We just finished a beach renourishment project that was originally supposed to begin before Hurricane Ian. After Ian, we put in an emergency berm with help from FEMA and that did help us. Whether it was Helene or Milton, it did get inundated because we didn't have the opportunity to put in dune planting. That was rebuilt and we are now speedily working up and down the island to put in plantings for that emergency berm that was rebuilt. We are looking at working with an engineering firm to possibly address a wave mitigation wall. We

are in the studying process right now. We think it might help with changing some of the FEMA flood zones and being able to do things on ground level and protect properties in uplands. After three years of the government working in tents and trailers, we moved into a hard building this month and it's been exciting for staff. We have held our first three council meetings there.

Kyle Lasek (Bartow): This is my first time attending for Commissioner Trish Pfeiffer. I learned a lot and I appreciate it. It is something that I will be active in, and I will keep the knowledge going.

John Hall/Randy Smith (SWFWMD): We will be finalizing and getting the report on the Upper Peace River MFLs next month. We will still have to go through a peer review on that. We will be doing that probably after the first of the year. This was a re-evaluation of the low flow MFL that was set on the Peace River in 2006. It is also evaluating the setting as well. That report will be finished next month. The next phase of that will be kicking off the public peer review process which will likely begin after the first of the year. Once we get through that public hearing process the district will incorporate any of the comments from the year, they can get it through the draft report and MFLs themselves and ultimately bring that to our Governing Board and on the calendar in 2026 for adoption. We have a restoration project on Cape Haze on the Coral Creek property with FDEP. We have completed two previous restoration projects on this property. This will be the third one and it is 410 acres of coastal restoration including restoration enhancement of estuarine wetlands. The project will also improve water quality and improve the specific habitat of economically important species such as tarpon. That project will go out to bid soon.

Agenda Item #11 — Public Comment — Elizabeth Sweigert, Co-Chair

There were no comments from the public.

Agenda Item #12 — Future Meeting Date and Topics — Elizabeth Sweigert, Co-Chair

Contact jhecker@chnep.org if you would like any topics added to future agendas. The next meeting date is January 22nd, 2026.

Agenda Item #13 — Adjourn – Elizabeth Sweigert, Co-Chair

Meeting was adjourned at 1:06 pm.