

COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH STRATEGY



An Appendix to the
2025 Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan
of the Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership



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INTRODUCTION

The Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP) is one of 28 “estuaries of national significance” in the National Estuary Program established under the Federal Clean Water Act. Designated in 1995, the CHNEP is comprised of citizens, elected officials, resource managers, and commercial and recreational resource users working to improve the water quality and ecological integrity of the waterways within its 5,400 square mile working area. This Communication and Outreach Strategy supports implementation of CHNEP’s Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP), the strategic plan that contains actions to address Water Quality Improvement, Hydrologic Restoration, Fish, Wildlife, and Habitat Protection, and Public Engagement priorities identified by the partnership and that guide development of annual work plans and budgets.

The Goals and Objectives of the CCMP are rooted in sound science and measured results; but for the general public, scientific information is often difficult to access and understand. CHNEP and its partners work to present technical information and science-based initiatives toward accomplishing CCMP Goals and Objectives in ways that are meaningful and easy to understand by all stakeholders, including policymakers who can utilize the information to advance CCMP Actions and Activities.

Many issues addressed in the CCMP’s Action Plans for Water Quality Improvement, Hydrologic Restoration, and Fish, Wildlife, and Habitat Protection require effective public communication and engagement. Increased public understanding of these issues, together with opportunities for public participation in their solutions, can lead to better individual choices and actions that increase protection and restoration of estuaries and watersheds. CHNEP plays an important role in promoting education and engagement opportunities both directly and indirectly by building the capacity of local non-profit and community organizations to deliver collaborative programs in environmental education and citizen science. Sharing effective public outreach methods exponentially increases environmental knowledge and awareness across partner networks.

The Vision of the CCMP’s Public Engagement Action Plan is an informed, engaged public making choices and taking actions that increase protection and restoration of estuaries and watersheds. The Action Plan’s Objective is to increase the proportion of the population that supports and participates in actions to protect and restore estuaries and watersheds. To achieve this, the Plan identifies Actions to promote environmental awareness, understanding, and stewardship to the general public, new target audiences, and policymakers; and strengthen partner collaboration in education and engagement programs.

This Communication and Outreach Strategy provides multi-year guidance for implementing the Public Engagement Action Plan of the CCMP, including a) guiding principles, goals and objectives; b) target audiences; c) narrative descriptions of activities; d) implementers for those activities; e) key deliverables, and f) a budget and timeframe for implementing activities.



OVERALL CHNEP COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH STRATEGY

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The Guiding Principles of this Communication and Outreach Strategy are to distribute outreach materials, activities, and grants to all 10 counties CHNEP serves; and to identify realistic and achievable communications and public engagement projects and activities that can be accomplished by CHNEP staff with the help of the Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC). The CHNEP CAC has advised that creating outreach materials that effectively translate science into action and tailor messages to specific audiences, increasing communication to policymakers, providing materials in various easy-to-understand formats or in multiple languages, and continuing to provide access to these materials and messages at outdoor educational events and activities are important to the communities they represent.

GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

With a Goal to increase the proportion of the population that supports and participates in actions to protect and restore estuaries and watersheds, CHNEP will focus on the following Objectives.

Use Targeted Messaging

The general public audience for CHNEP includes people of all ages with a variety of backgrounds and knowledge who are located in different geographic locations throughout the CHNEP area. With a scope this large, a “one size fits all” message or communication channel is not always effective. Communicating to a “general audience” can sometimes have limited success because of compromises or assumptions a communicator must make about what constitutes a common language among a variety of social, political, geographic, and economic groups in the community. Instead, customizing communications for specific groups or “target” audiences can bring many benefits. For example, many people respond more favorably to communication that appeals to their identity and addresses their specific interests, uses language they understand and are familiar with, and reaches them through accessible methods they commonly use. In more targeted communications, specific issues can be matched with specific solutions, taking into consideration the particular priorities and capacities of the target audience.

CHNEP’s Communication and Outreach Strategy subdivides larger target groups, tailors messaging, and uses communication channels preferred by that target audience or pertinent to that geographic region. CHNEP serves a broad population and has identified key target audiences with whom to communicate.

- **Agricultural communities** contribute significantly to the economy of Central and Southwest Florida. Promoting agricultural best management practices, including fertilizer and water management practices, will provide significant returns in terms of water and habitat



quality. Adoption of farm BMPs can also reduce costs and labor for farmers. Ranchers and farmers can also be vital conservation partners in their ability to reserve areas of land through conservation easements for wildlife or water storage/filtration.

- **Commercial and recreational fisherpersons and charter captains** are another important economic sector in the CHNEP area. Improving fishing practices will help protect fisheries and fishery habitats. Fisherpersons are important advocates for environmental protection and restoration as their interests are directly connected to healthy waters and habitats.
- **Hotel and tourism leaders** interface with visitors to Central and Southwest Florida every day. They are important stakeholders in environmental protection because their tourism-based industry depends upon a healthy environment.
- **Boaters and marinas** can be strong advocates for water and habitat quality. Improving boating and marina practices can improve water and habitat quality and reduce unintended impacts to fish and wildlife. Boaters and marina operators benefit and depend on clean water.
- **Heartland communities** are important stewards of water quality in inland areas, where there are large conservation and natural resource protection opportunities. Helping to support their efforts in improving upstream environments improves their quality of life, as well as creates cascading downstream benefits.
- **Businesses** are significant resource users. Improving business practices and engaging businesses in environmental leadership will yield significant support for environmental protection and restoration of Central and Southwest Florida. Having a high quality of life, which depends on good environmental conditions, is important for attracting and retaining workers.
- **Policymakers** are integral for continued legislative and public support of the CHNEP and implementation of its CCMP. Communicating the science-based strategies and data-driven recommendations of the CCMP to public officials is essential for encouraging adoption and implementation of effective environmental policy and sound decision-making.
- **Traditionally underrepresented and vulnerable** segments of the population can be difficult to reach by traditional methods due to factors such as lack of resources, transportation, low income, language barriers, and cultural differences. Often, they are affected by issues associated with the vulnerable areas where they live. Better serving this target audience has great potential to magnify CHNEP key messages and to broaden CHNEP's reach and impact.

Use Multimedia Approaches

Scientists require long-term monitoring and data management strategies in order to detect and evaluate environmental changes. Resource managers require analyses of best available data to create sound management plans. Government leaders require trusted advisors and solid management plans to help them make effective policy decisions within a framework of



competing community priorities. Residents require compelling and useful information to make better choices that may personally be more expensive or less convenient. Effective outreach requires more than just providing access to good information — it requires translation and transfer of that information in ways that resonate with the community's identity, values, and sense of responsibility and pride.

Reaching different stakeholder groups requires the use of a variety of multimedia communication tools and outreach methods that are updated as needed. Presently, some prefer printed educational materials while other prefer digital outreach through websites and social media. Improved access to educational content can be provided to remote participants through digital means including recording meeting and Summit presentations and making them available on the organization's website and/or YouTube video channel afterwards.

Guided by the Communication and Outreach Strategy, the CHNEP will continue to use a variety of media and outreach methods to reach different stakeholder groups. CHNEP actively conducts outreach via special events, printed materials, online communications, public presentations, and volunteer opportunity e-newsletters, as well as supporting community programs and events. The CHNEP uses the following communication channels to report programmatic results to the public and stakeholders.

- **Websites** that offer a useful centralized source of information about CHNEP activities, projects, publications, etc. The CHNEP has two websites, one for the organization and programmatic publications (CHNEP.org) one for housing data, analysis tools, and documents (the CHNEP Water Atlas).
- **Media releases** that deliver timely news and announcements of CHNEP program accomplishments, events, and topical information about environmental issues facing the region.
- **Fact Sheets** that provide foundational concepts about watersheds and estuaries, updates on seagrass and water quality conditions, and other informational topics of interest.
- **Social media** that is effective in conveying information quickly and reminding people about upcoming events, best practices, as well as CHNEP activities and successes.
- **Events** that offer person-to-person learning opportunities and community access to multiple organizations at the same time. They also allow for audience feedback through commenting and question and answer sessions.
- **Presentations** at community events or partner institutions that allow CHNEP staff to communicate with new audiences to deliver educational and program information.



- **Volunteer opportunity e-newsletters** that consolidate partner volunteer events across the region to send to subscribers looking for educational and immersive opportunities to conduct citizen science and restoration.
- **Workshops and conferences** that bring experts, stakeholders, and interested citizens together to learn about and discuss relevant issues and innovations. They often spark new ideas, partnerships, and action towards projects and solutions.
- **Scientific publications** generated by CHNEP that convey important science and policy information to a broader audience. CHNEP will continue to produce scientific publications and attend scientific conferences to share with the broader scientific community.

Presently, the CHNEP staff and CAC find these to be the most effective communication methods for reaching the communities CHNEP serves. However, as digital technology and norms about how people receive and share information change, it will be essential to routinely assess multimedia communication tools and update them as needed.

Encourage Public Engagement and Community Partnerships to Deliver Outreach

CHNEP has a relatively small staff to cover a large geographic area. Supplementing staff initiatives with the involvement of CAC members who can galvanize community-driven support expands the Partnership's outreach programs.

- **CHNEP Staff** - All CHNEP staff participate in educational outreach in some capacity, communicating to diverse audiences about CHNEP and watershed issues. The CHNEP staff includes a Director of Research and Restoration and an Executive Director who lead and develop the organization's public engagement and education initiatives. These initiatives are then executed by the Conservation Specialist in conjunction with other CHNEP staff to create and deliver educational content, materials, and opportunities to partners and the public.
- **Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC)** - Composed of residents in the CHNEP area, the CAC provides the critical link between the CHNEP and the public. The CAC provides input about public concerns and ideas and communicates CHNEP information back to the communities they represent. It is also an essential mechanism for sharing CHNEP information and resources with key community organizations and individuals that may not be directly involved with the CHNEP. In addition, the CAC discusses and provides input to the CHNEP about outreach and public engagement projects at their meetings, which are announced and open to the public. The Chair of the CAC also provides regular reports on CAC activities to the Management Committee.



- **CHNEP Partners** – CHNEP includes dozens of members and contributing partners, including municipalities, counties, regional and state agencies, universities, and non-profit environmental land trust, education, and advocacy organizations. Many of these partners deliver educational outreach specific to their environmental missions and can assist CHNEP's communications efforts. Rather than duplicate these campaigns, CHNEP efforts are collaborative, inclusive, and supportive. CHNEP seeks to leverage and support common communications efforts and fill gaps where needed. The structure of the CHNEP lends itself to collaboration and puts it in a strong position to build capacity for multi-partner projects and leveraging of funding resources. The CHNEP will continue to work with community partners to plan events and activities that foster natural resource protection.



TARGETED COMMUNICATIONS ACTIVITIES FOR CCMP IMPLEMENTATION

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ACTION 1: PROMOTE ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY, AWARENESS, AND STEWARDSHIP THROUGH EXPANDED EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

Activities	Target Audiences	Implementer	Timeframe	Annual Budget	Key 5-Yr Deliverables
1.1 Support programs, events, presentations, and educational content that focus on key messages communicated in readily understandable language related to protection and restoration of estuaries and watersheds, including water quality, hydrology, habitat, and wildlife issues.	General public with a focus on visitors, new residents, homeowners, students, and the media.	CHNEP	Ongoing	\$25K-\$100K/ CHNEP, 320 Funds, Grants	10 research, restoration, or outreach initiatives showcased in educational materials, presentations, or at public events annually
1.2 Provide information to interested public about activities to participate in research, monitoring, and restoration.	General public	CHNEP	Ongoing	<\$25K/ CHNEP, 320 Funds	Monthly mass communications to volunteer opportunities subscribers about volunteer opportunities.

Description of Activities:

Continue to Provide Essential Ongoing Communication Tools and Programs

CHNEP maintains a variety of tools to provide ongoing communication of Partnership goals, including website, social media, publications, and events. These allow CHNEP to tap into a variety of communication channels and reach different general audiences, not just environmental groups. Information can be provided to new residents and homeowners through partnering with utilities, libraries, parks, chambers of commerce, county extension offices, government administrative offices, car and boat registration departments, local civic and



business organizations, realtors, neighborhood and homeowner associations, especially where the CAC and CHNEP partners already have contacts established. Visitors can be reached by distributing information through popular tourist platforms such as libraries, visitors' bureaus, airports, restaurants, and recreational outposts.

CHNEP reaches students by partnering with school systems and youth organizations. Students are increasingly using e-learning platforms in their educational environment. Converting or creating e-learning modules that are available via the web and meet STEM requirement can expand outreach and supplement traditional education students receive. CHNEP could provide funding for partners that conduct outreach to students via games or contests that engage students to create their own teaching materials through art or technology.

Disseminate Information about Volunteer Opportunities

The CAC has ranked volunteer events, professional and citizen training events, and water quality monitoring opportunities as the most effective volunteer programs to continue or expand. CHNEP will continue to support partner volunteer events to provide the public with a monthly newsletter of volunteer opportunities to learn and directly engage in natural resource protection and restoration opportunities.

Work with Local Media

Local media sources play an important role in educating the public about pertinent issues and events, because public exposure to environmental issues occurs most commonly through their interactions with mainstream media. They can provide in-depth reporting and are commonly used by policymakers to gauge community priorities. Crafting and sending out press releases on noteworthy CHNEP initiative developments and maintaining regular communication and relationships with TV news, radio, and newspaper correspondents will expand CHNEP outreach to wider audiences and may lead to increased volunteer engagement. Cultivating relationships with environmental reporters at local newspapers, radio, and TV stations not only increases their literacy about environmental issues, but it maintains the reputation of CHNEP as a trusted local expert to consult, thereby facilitating accurate dissemination of information to the general public.

Website and Social Media

CHNEP provides many outreach tools and programs to help expand watershed education and understanding throughout the CHNEP area. As CHNEP works to utilize its websites and social media as essential data sharing and communication distribution channels. Cross-promoting and sharing partner information can broaden and reinforce important natural resource protection initiatives.



**PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ACTION 2: EXPAND REACH OF EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES
TO NEW TARGET AUDIENCES**

Activities	Target Audiences	Implementer	Timeframe	Annual Budget	Key 5-Yr Deliverables
2.1. Engage stakeholders in estuary and watershed protection activities and educational programs.	Businesses, farmers, fisherpersons, boaters, hotels and marinas.	CHNEP	Ongoing	<\$25K/ CHNEP, 320 Funds	An annual public event that includes different stakeholder perspectives and presenters.
2.2. Engage different communities in estuary and watershed protection activities and educational programs.	Various communities in the CHNEP area.	CHNEP	Ongoing	<\$25K/ CHNEP, 320 Funds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An annual event or activity that focuses on bringing together various different communities. • Translation of educational materials into multiple languages or formats.

Description of Activities:

Reaching All Communities

The CAC stated that the CHNEP educational publications and websites are effective CHNEP outreach initiatives and that improving inclusion and accessibility of these is a way to expand reach to all communities. For example, certain publications could be translated into multiple languages and/or circulation of printed media could be expanded to new areas. Attending events that occur after work hours or over the weekend may help lower barriers of participation.

Focus on Community Interests in Messaging and Relationship Building

Conducting outreach on priority issues for different communities and emphasizing how environmental stewardship can improve family health and well-being can be an effective introduction to more complicated issues. Building relationships and supporting community initiatives that can integrate with environmental messaging (e.g., arts, health, faith), can help build trust, engagement, and foster partnerships with people who may become ambassadors for CHNEP priorities within their community.



Continue Conservation Grants to Community Groups Engaging in Natural Resource Protection

Continuing to award conservation grants to community groups can build capacity for environmental education and stewardship. These grants can also increase community awareness and support for CCMP goals.

Leverage Existing Resources and Partnerships to Expand Boater and Fisherperson Education

Maintaining and expanding partnerships and opportunities with Florida Fish and Wildlife Commissioner, Sea Grant, West Coast Inland Navigation District and others who engage boaters and fisherpersons could lead to CHNEP educational resources being shared in boating and angling guides, fishing magazines, fishing clinics, and boater training classes.

Partner with Existing Inland and Coastal Events

Partnering with and expanding on existing community events could be a way for CHNEP to meet people where they are and to reach new audiences. Events with broad audiences like the Swamp Cabbage Festival, Arcadia Rodeos, or other community events throughout the CHNEP areas may be effective places to expand outreach. Attending or partnering with these events can remove the barrier for access for some in those communities.



PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ACTION 3: STRENGTHEN PARTNER COLLABORATION IN EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS

Activities	Target Audiences	Implementer	Timeframe	Annual Budget	Key 5-Yr Deliverables
3.1 Build and support capacity of non-profit and community partners to educate and engage volunteers in outreach and activities that further CCMP implementation.	Non-profit and community partners.	Co-leads (CHNEP, Florida Sea Grant, UF/IFAS Extension, NGOs, Universities and Research Institutions).	Ongoing	\$100K-\$500K/ CHNEP, 320 Funds, Grants.	5 new non-profit collaborative projects over 5 years.
3.2 Bring partners together, provide resources, and coordinate natural disaster and episodic events response and recovery efforts.	Community and governmental partners	Lead (CHNEP for convening partners and coordination); FDEM, FDEP, County and Municipal Governments, SWFWMD, SFWMD, USGS, NOAA, FWC, USFWS, NGOs, FDACS, FEMA, FDOH, Private sector.	Ongoing	\$50,000- \$75,000/CHNEP, 320 Funds, State of Florida	Increased implementation of episodic event environmental sampling by CHNEP member entities.



Description of Activities:

Continue to Support Collaborative Citizen Science and Volunteer Opportunities

CHNEP will continue working with partners to maintain and/or expand citizen science, training, and volunteer programs like the Charlotte Harbor Estuaries Volunteer Water Quality Monitoring Network (CHEVWQMN).

Continue to Facilitate Public and Professional Environmental Education

CHNEP will continue hosting workshops and trainings such as the Southwest Florida Resiliency and Watershed Summits. These professional information exchanges expand relationships, build new partnerships, enhance skills, and serve as springboards for initiating new collaborative projects.

Continue Grant and Sponsorship Support for Community Natural Resource Protection

CHNEP will continue to support and fund partner and community projects that engage citizens in activities related to CHNEP goals. For example, conservation grant funding may be prioritized for projects that reach new or different communities or that work with new community partners.

Continue Speaking Engagements

CHNEP will continue to provide speakers for other organizations' meetings as an effective way to educate new groups about CHNEP priorities and initiatives.

Increasing Implementation of Episodic Event Environmental Sampling

CHNEP will continue to bring partners together, provide resources, and coordinate natural disaster and episodic events response and recovery efforts. For example, CHNEP will maintain webpages to share hurricane assistance resources and a data dashboard documenting storm conditions and impacts.



PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ACTION 4: INCREASE OUTREACH TO INTERESTED POLICYMAKERS TO ENHANCE UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORT FOR CCMP IMPLEMENTATION

Activities	Target Audiences	Implementer	Timeframe	Annual Budget	Key 5-Yr Deliverables
4.1 Provide regular updates to interested policymakers showcasing use of best available science and examples of success to reinforce the relationship between land use, water resource management decisions, environment, economy, and community.	Federal, State, and Local public officials.	CHNEP.	Ongoing	\$25K-\$100K/ CHNEP, 320 Funds.	Annual communications with interested elected or appointed officials of governmental entities.

Description of Activities:

Offer Updates to Policymakers through Preferred Communication and Engagement Channels

CHNEP will continue to advance policymakers' understanding of priority CHNEP issues by offering routine educational fact sheets, calendars with educational inserts, or other publications, as well as providing meeting and conference opportunities with educational content and speakers and recordings after the fact for sharing with colleagues or staff.

Showcase CHNEP Project Results, Priority Issues, and Economic Impacts/Benefits

Showcasing successful CHNEP projects and the National Estuary Program's collaborative approach to leveraging federal dollars is important for continued legislative and public support of the CHNEP. Ranked lists of priority issues and solutions and basic cost-benefit analyses of each are important tools for building understanding and support. Sharing results from economic valuations of natural resource restoration and protection can increase policymaker support for investment in land, water, and wildlife protection. Inviting policymakers to attend CHNEP and partner events can provide them first-hand and memorable experiences showcasing CHNEP results.

Engage Network of Other National Estuary Program Entities and Partners

Collaborating with other entities in the National Estuary Program (NEP) to provide shared federal legislative communications can be an effective way to build support for the NEP model. Additionally, supporting the Association of National Estuary Programs allows for legislative support that provides vital information and resources for collective NEP federal policymaker education.



CHNEP COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH BUDGET

CHNEP's annual Work Plans and Budgets direct the funding and specific activities undertaken each year to implement the Communication and Outreach Strategy. The CHNEP estimates approximately \$196,000 to be spent on communication and outreach-related budgeted expenses during the 2026 Fiscal Year:

Personnel	\$75,000
Communication Software & Fees	\$12,000
Policymaker Education (ANEP Dues)	\$4,500
Sponsorships	\$5,000
Events	\$14,500
Publications	\$50,000
Publication Design Support	\$5,000
Conservation Grants	\$30,000
Total	\$196,000

CONCLUSION

The CHNEP has been a regional leader for over three decades in educating and engaging the public in natural resource conservation. Guided by this Communication and Outreach Strategy, the CHNEP will continue to communicate programmatic results to the public and stakeholders via special events, printed materials, online communications, public presentations, workshops, sharing of volunteer opportunities, and supporting community programs and events through a conservation grants program. By evolving and adapting its use of targeted multimedia communication tools and outreach methods, the CHNEP will continue to play a vital role in equipping residents, visitors, and policymakers with the information they need to understand and assist in the protection and restoration of the land, water, and wildlife in the CHNEP area.

