



COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH STRATEGY

An Appendix to the
2019 Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan
of the Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership



326 West Marion Avenue
Punta Gorda, FL 33950
www.CHNEP.org

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, Hydrological Restoration, Public Engagement, and Fish, Wildlife, and Habitat Protection 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 science-based initiatives and progress toward accomplishing CCMP Goals and Objectives in ways that are meaningful and easy to understand by all stakeholders, including policymakers.

Many issues addressed in the CCMP’s Action Plans 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; as well as to strengthen non-profit 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 equitably distribute outreach materials, activities, and grants to all 10 counties CHNEP now 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). During a brainstorming session for the new Communication and Outreach Strategy, the CHNEP CAC 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 socially, politically, geographically, and economically diverse groups in the community. Instead, communicating directly with these 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 appropriate language, and reaches them through accessible methods. In more targeted communications, specific issues can be matched with specific solutions, taking into consideration the interests 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 diverse population and has identified key target audiences with whom to communicate.



- **Agricultural communities** contribute significantly to the economy of Central and Southwest Florida. Helping farmers incorporate best management practices into their work, including best 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 fishers, charter captains, and recreational fishers** are another important economic sector in the CHNEP area. Improving fishing practices will help protect fisheries and fishery habitats. Fishers 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 advocates for environmental protection because their 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 them to understand their role in improving upstream environments improves their quality of life, as well as creating 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 underserved** segments of the population can be difficult to reach by traditional methods. Some are constrained by low income, language barriers, and cultural differences. Often, they are affected by environmental justice issues associated with the vulnerable areas where they live. While underserved, this target audience has great potential to magnify CHNEP key messages and serve as ambassadors to their communities.



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, printed materials like magazines and brochures may be a preferred way for some CHNEP-area residents and visitors to receive information. However, research shows students prefer digital outreach, so publicizing events online and through social media is an important factor in increasing awareness and attendance. Improved access to educational content can be provided to remote participants through digital means including social media posts, live video streaming and programming during events, webinars, and online access and promotion of recorded meetings.

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, workshops, and volunteer engagement activities, as well as supporting community programs and events through a small grants program. 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 one for housing data and analysis 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.
- **Magazine and Fact Sheets** that provide foundational concepts about watersheds and estuaries and how human activities play a role in their health or provide readers an in-depth understanding of CHNEP work.
- **Social media** that is effective in conveying information quickly and reminding people about upcoming events, best practices, and CHNEP 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, surveys, and interviews.
- **Presentations** at community events or partner institutions that allow CHNEP staff to communicate with new and diverse audiences to deliver educational and program information.
- **Volunteer activities** that offer hands-on exposure to the natural world, providing immersive educational opportunities for participants to see first-hand how they are connected to their watershed.
- **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 that must cover a large geographic area. Supplementing staff initiatives with the involvement of CAC members and organized community-driven support and coordinating with partner outreach programs can expand reach.

- **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 Research and Outreach Manager and Executive Director who lead the organization's public engagement and education initiatives. CHNEP staff create and deliver educational content, materials, and opportunities to partners and the general public.
- **Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC)** - Composed of residents in the CHNEP area, the CAC provides the critical link between 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 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 29 supporting members and dozens of 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 CHNEP lends itself to collaboration and puts it in a strong position to build capacity for multi-partner projects and leverage funding resources. The CHNEP will continue to work with community partners to plan events and activities that foster ownership and 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 monthly	\$25K-\$100K/CHNEP, 320 Funds, Grants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At least 10 research, restoration, or outreach initiatives showcased in educational materials, presentations, or at public events annually (via social media posts, website updates, Harbor Happenings, local media stories).
1.2 Provide CHNEP volunteers with activities to participate in research, monitoring, and restoration.	General public with a focus on visitors, new residents, homeowners, students, and the media.	CHNEP	Ongoing monthly	<\$25K/CHNEP, 320 Funds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At least 10 CHNEP volunteer activities hosted annually.

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 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.

Continue Volunteer Events

Among the many volunteer opportunities CHNEP offers annually, the CAC ranked volunteer events, professional and citizen training events, and water quality monitoring opportunities as the most effective volunteer programs to continue or expand over the next 5 years. CHNEP will continue (and where possible expand) volunteer events, will continue working with partners to maintain and/or expand citizen science opportunities, and will provide the public with 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 achieve the CCMP performance metric of showcasing 10 initiatives over the next 5 years, these top engagement activities should be prioritized on essential communication distribution channels like CHNEP website and social media. Coordinated messaging and timing on these top platforms will broaden and reinforce important 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 businesses and other priority stakeholders in estuary and watershed protection activities and educational programs.	Businesses, farmers, fishers, boaters, hotels and marinas.	CHNEP	Ongoing monthly	<\$25K/CHNEP, 320 Funds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An annual event or activity that focuses on business and/or other priority stakeholders.
2.2. Engage underrepresented and underserved communities in estuary and watershed protection activities and educational programs.	Underrepresented and underserved communities in the CHNEP area.	CHNEP	Ongoing monthly	<\$25K/CHNEP, 320 Funds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An annual event or activity that focuses on underserved communities. • Translation of educational materials to multiple languages or formats.

Description of Activities:

Build Inclusion and Accessibility into Existing, Effective Outreach Initiatives

The CAC stated that the CHNEP magazine and website are effective CHNEP outreach initiatives and that improving inclusion in these efforts will expand reach to traditionally under-represented communities. For example, certain publications on the website could be translated into multiple languages and/or circulation of printed media can be expanded in traditionally underserved areas. Scheduling events or workshops after work or over the weekend and providing food and children’s activities may help lower barriers of participation for some people.

Focus on Community Interests in Messaging and Relationship Building

Conducting outreach on priority issues for under-represented 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 Grant Programs for Under-represented Community Groups

CHNEP will continue to award grants to community groups to build capacity for environmental education and stewardship. These grants increase community awareness and support for CCMP goals.

Leverage Existing Resources and Partnerships to Expand Boater and Fisher Education

Maintaining and expanding partnerships and opportunities with FWC, Sea Grant, West Coast Inland Navigation District (WCIND), USCG, and boating clubs could expand and integrate CHNEP goals into existing boating and angling guides, fishing magazines, 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 start building new target audiences. Events with diverse audiences like the North Port Newcomers Day, Sugar Festival, the Swamp Cabbage Festival, rodeos, or major fishing tournaments may be effective places to expand outreach and volunteer opportunities to new audiences. Attending or partnering with these events removes the barrier for access faced by those communities.



PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ACTION 3: STRENGTHEN NON-PROFIT 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.	CHNEP, TNC, local land trusts, Sanibel Sea School, National Audubon, Audubon of Florida, Charlotte Harbor Environmental Center, SCCF, Calusa Waterkeeper, Colleges and Universities.	Ongoing monthly	\$100K-\$500K/CHNEP, 320 Funds, Grants.	• At least 5 new non-profit collaborative projects over 5 years.

Description of Activities:

Continue to Partner on Collaborative Citizen Science and Volunteer Programs, Expanding Opportunities to New Areas or Audiences

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). As opportunities arise, CHNEP will leverage new partnerships to expand these programs inland or to new target audiences, for example by funding water test kits for the LaBelle fossil camp.

Continue Facilitating Professional Development and Integrate New Collaborative Projects into Existing Framework

CHNEP will continue hosting workshops and trainings such as the Watershed Summit. 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 and Target Priority Audiences

CHNEP will continue to support and fund partner and community projects that engage citizens in activities related to CHNEP goals. Allocating funding to partner projects and engaging new priority audiences will engage new priority communities and industries identified in Public Engagement Action 2. For example, conservation grant funding may be prioritized for projects that target or involve under-represented or underserved community groups, including fishers, boaters, and agricultural communities.

Continue Speaking Engagements

The CAC supports the CHNEP continuing to provide speakers for other organizations' meetings as an effective way to educate new groups about CHNEP priorities and initiatives.



PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ACTION 4: STRATEGY: INCREASE OUTREACH TO 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 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 monthly	\$25K-\$100K/CHNEP, 320 Funds.	• 10 meetings with elected or appointed officials or governmental entities annually.

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 educational briefs and volunteer opportunities based on how elected officials prefer to receive information or be engaged. Mailing magazines, calendars, or other publications, and providing policy briefs, timely memos, and links to recorded workshops and presentations are some options to further supplement regular meetings.

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. Conducting and 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 Programs and Partners

Supporting the Association of National Estuary Programs and collaborating with other NEPs to provide shared messaging and technical expertise on issues can be an effective way to leverage local resources and build support for the NEP model. Additionally, working with other NEPs allows sharing of information and resources for building CHNEP’s efficiency and collective NEP federal policymaker education.



CHNEP COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH BUDGET

CHNEP’s Annual Work Plans direct implementation of the Communication and Outreach Strategy. The CHNEP estimates approximately \$270,000 per year to be spent on communications during the 2019–2023 CCMP period. Annual estimates for communications budget categories are itemized below.

Estimated Annual Communications Budget Itemization

Personnel	\$140,000
Conservation Grants / Sponsorships	\$35,000
Educational Events	\$45,000
Publications	\$45,000
Other	\$5,000
Total	\$270,000

CONCLUSION

The CHNEP has been a regional leader for two 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, and volunteer engagement activities — as well as supporting community programs and events through a small grants program. By evolving and adapting its use of targeted multimedia communication tools and outreach methods 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 populations in the CHNEP area.

