CHNEP Policy Committee Meeting
Thursday, January 22, 2026 , 9:00 AM – 1:00 PM
Centennial Park, Large Multipurpose Room
1120 Centennial Blvd., Port Charlotte, FL 33953

Policy Committee Draft Meeting Minutes

Members Present:

Craig Hesterlee	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 4
Elizabeth Sweigert	Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP)
Jamie Wolanin (alternate)	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)
Vivianna Bendixson (alternate)	Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD)
Joe Tiseo (alternate)	Charlotte County
Dawn Ritter (alternate)	Highlands County
Trish Petrosky	Lee County
Ryan Ellis (alternate)	Polk County
Keith Keene	City of Arcadia
Joe Kilraine	City of Cape Coral
Justin Mahon (alternate)	City of Fort Myers
Demetrius Petrow	City of North Port
Greg Julian (alternate)	City of Punta Gorda
Dustin Everitt (alternate)	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)
Sarina Barnard	Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP)
Michelle McGill	Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP)
Keara Abel	Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP)
Felicia Burks	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 4
Beth Carsten	City of Arcadia
Chadd Chustz	Town of Fort Myers Beach
Barbara Kirkpatrick, PhD	Public
Lenny Landau	Presenter
Devon Moore	City of Winter Haven
Barry Rosen, PhD	Florida Gulf Coast University

Agenda Item #1 — Call to Order and Introductions — Craig Hesterlee, Co-Chair

Policy Committee Co-Chair Craig Hesterlee called the meeting to order at 9:06 am. Introductions were then made.

Agenda Item #2 — Agenda Additions or Deletions — Craig Hesterlee, Co-Chair

No additions or deletions were made to the agenda.

JOE TISEO MOVED, SECONDED BY PHIL FLOOD, 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 — Craig Hesterlee, 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 January 9th, 2026. Highlights are as follows:

The Management Committee was held on January 9th, 2026. The Committee heard the Technical Advisory Report from the TAC Co-Chair Arielle Taylor-Manges. In the meeting, TAC members reviewed and approved the Coastal Charlotte Harbor Monitoring Network Standard Operating Procedures and Quality Assurance Protection Plan, and also reviewed, added suggested edits, and support Policy Committee approval with edits of updated *CHNEP Monitoring Strategy.* The TAC members then heard presentations from Dr. Eric Milbrandt of the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation on the *Loss of Seagrass in Matlacha Pass and the Distribution and Abundance of Macroalgae*, Dr. Rachel Rotz from Florida Gulf Coast University on *Understanding Nutrient Loading in the Peace River Watershed*, and S. Carter Oleckna on behalf of Charlotte County and the University of Florida on *Tracking Nutrient Dynamics and Habitat Change: The Role of Participatory Science in Florida's Seagrass Meadows*. The Committee heard the Citizens Advisory Committee report from CAC Co-Chair, Harry Phillips. The CAC meeting included the introduction of 3 new CAC applicants all of whom attended the meeting. The CAC members also reviewed updated bylaws, suggested minor edits, and unanimously supported Policy Committee approval. The CAC also heard presentations of updated *CHNEP Communications and Outreach Strategy*, which CAC members suggested edits and then expressed support for Policy Committee to approve and on the new *CHNEP Resource Guide* outlining outreach and educational materials, which CAC members had requested. The CAC reviewed 4 Conservation Grant applications and supported funding 3, concurring with staff recommendation that 4th alternatively apply for an event scholarship. The Management Committee reviewed CHNEP's FY26 Call for Projects, the Amended FY26 Master Work Plan, and CHNEP Finance Strategy updates. The Committee unanimously recommended Policy Committee approval of the Amended FY26 Master Work Plan. The Committee made suggested edits to the Finance Strategy, and with those incorporated, unanimously recommended Policy Committee approval. The Management Committee reviewed CHNEP's FY26 Call for Projects, the Amended FY26 Master Work Plan, and CHNEP Finance Strategy updates. The Committee unanimously recommended Policy Committee approval of the Amended FY26 Master Work Plan. The Committee made suggested edits to the Finance Strategy, and with those incorporated, unanimously recommended Policy Committee approval.

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 program administration, CHNEP planned and executed both the Technical and Citizens Advisory Committee, Management Committee, and Policy Committee meetings. CHNEP reviewed Draft Program Evaluation Letter, providing feedback responses as requested, and received Final Program Evaluation Letter indicating CHNEP is "proficient" (highest rating

awarded) and will continue to be eligible to receive federal funding. CHNEP sent on-boarding materials to new Policy Committee member/co-chair, Craig Hesterlee, representing the EPA, and Commissioner Petrina McCutchen representing the City of Fort Meade, new Management Committee members, Rebekah Harp representing the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council, and County Manager Paul Carlisle representing Glades County, and new Technical Advisory Committee members, Christina Rimes representing the City of Venice, Kris Ramon representing Peace River Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority, Thomas Behlmer representing South Florida Water Management District, and Ryan Ellis representing Polk County. CHNEP welcomed new team member- Conservation Specialist, Michelle McGill who will lead on planning and representing CHNEP at outreach events, completed annual staff appraisals and held appraisal meetings with all CHNEP staff, drafted 2026 Amended Master Work Plan and Budget, 2025 ED Annual Evaluation with combined Policy Committee Responses, CHNEP Legislative Priorities, these were approved by CHNEP Policy Committee at 9/25 meeting, and sent fall FY26 invoice letters to CHNEP member counties and cities with the appropriate project and informational fact sheets relevant to their community. For finance and grants, CHNEP prepared and submitted FY25 annual End-of-Year reports for both EPA 320 and EPA IIJA grants, as well as drafted and sent FY2025 Significant Accomplishments for each; FY26 EPA 320 and EPA IIJA grants were applied for in June, with FY26 EPA 320 award just issued - still awaiting EPA IIJA FY26 award; prepared and submitted FDEP final report and reimbursement request, closing out FY25 grant and receiving full payment; prepared and submitted Q4 Report and deliverables for FY25 SWFWMD Agreement; and FY26 SWFWMD and FDEP Agreements drafted and approved, providing annual programmatic support funds.

CHNEP staff attended numerous partnership meetings. For presentations, CHNEP presented on the *CHNEP* and the *CHNEP Water Atlas* to the Suncoast Reef Rovers, presented on *Leveraging conventional partnerships with novel tools for holistic water quality and ecosystem management* at the 28th Biennial Coastal and Estuarine Research Federation (CERF) Conference in Richmond, VA, presented on *Comprehensive Vulnerability Assessments to Protect Critical Community Assets* at the 2025 Southwest Florida Resiliency Summit, and presented on the work of CHNEP and co-funded project at the Oct. 22nd City of Punta Gorda Council meeting. CHNEP hosted the annual 2025 Southwest Florida Resiliency Summit on September 16th & 17th which had approximately 150 attendees, including members of the public, scientists, industry experts, academia, and government. CHNEP shared the Summit playlist on YouTube and the updated Southwest Florida Resiliency page which now features resources from all past summits, including agendas, speaker biographies, and videos organized by tags for easier public access. For outreach, CHNEP worked with volunteers to host an educational outreach booth at the *Wildcat Tailgate Festival*, a community event held to kick off the school year in Hardee County. Shared educational materials with over 80 families; provided educational content at the *Miakka Hootenanny* in Sarasota County which had over 50 kids and adults visited the booth to play games and learn about different fish species adapted for different environments, how to properly measure a fish, and how objects can break down into microplastics; and provided CHNEP educational materials, including estuary and seagrass informational posters, to *Gasparilla Island State Park* staff to be placed in their parking lot of the park for interpretive purposes. For social media and publications, CHNEP sent out monthly subscriber emails on relevant upcoming public engagement events in the CHNEP area, shared posts for National Estuaries Week, showcasing conservation and SWFL wildlife, finalized CHNEP 2026 Nature Calendar content, designed, and oversaw printing and mailing, and refreshed and reposted CHNEP project factsheets with updated language, organizations, funding sources, and activities as outlined in the new 2025 CCMP. CHNEP has 14 new Facebook followers for a total of 2,055, 5,809 subscribers for the educational mailings, 3,551 unique visitors and 4,742 page visits to the CHNEP website, 18,090 YouTube views with 107 subscribers and 368 videos, and 637 total Instagram followers. There were no Policy Committee comments or questions.

The CHNEP Water Atlas 2025 Water Quality Trend Analysis was completed for 17 water quality parameters. The Suncoast Waterkeeper enterococci data was added on the Coastal Conditions Map. The Waterbody pages feature a new 5-year chart design that displays the 6-month moving average, annual mean, and threshold for each parameter. The CHNEP Water Atlas tutorial videos are available on the CHNEP Water Atlas Video Library, the CHNEP YouTube Channel, and on CHNEP.org.

For the Coastal Charlotte Harbor Monitoring Network, the Q4 data was collected and submitted to close out FY25; the Q1 data collection was completed for FY26 and Q2 is underway; the CCHMN Annual Audits and meeting were held in August; and the 2025 Updates to project *Standard Operating Procedures* were reviewed and adopted at the December 4 CHNEP TAC meeting as Technical Report 25-01. The fact sheet 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 the Charlotte County Vulnerability Assessment, the project partner, Charlotte County will complete the baseline vulnerability assessment. Critically significant assets were aggregated and mapped, metadata (e.g. elevation for critical assets and structures) was standardized to meet FDEP requirements. The modeling of flood Exposure & Sensitivity/Risk analysis for critical assets under different flood scenarios was conducted. County departments are reviewing the final flood exposure data. The next steps are to identify focus areas for adaptation planning and to present the final report and recommendations at Public Meeting #2 and the Charlotte Board of County Commissioners for final approval, after which the final data and report will be sent to FDEP.

For the Polk County Vulnerability Assessment, project partners CFRPC and Polk County will model additional rainfall flood scenarios. The HEC-RAS model was used for additional flood scenarios. This includes 200/500-year, and compound flooding event (saturated ground). Model results were used to select priority areas in the County to create a visual interpretation of the flooding events for community outreach. The results from the model and visualizations were presented to Polk STAC, and the next step is the presentation of the final report and recommendations to Polk Board of County Considerations for final approval, after which the final data and report will be sent to FDEP.

For Highlands, Hardee, DeSoto Counties Vulnerability Assessments, project partners CFRPC and Counties will identify Adaptation Action Areas for each county based on data gathered for vulnerability assessments. Then, they will develop draft plans with engineering designs and cost estimates for top 3 AAA for each County. The methodology for prioritizing critical assets and areas were developed and approved. Final critical assets flood exposure and sensitivity analyses for 100yr. & 500yr. rainfall flood events were complete. The next step is to generate appendix reports to each County VA for top 3 priority AAA with lists of projects, designs and costs.

CHNEP also produces and periodically updates fact sheets on Basin Water Quality, Basin Seagrass Health, and State & Federal research and restoration funding opportunities to be resources for member use. In conclusion, Ms. Hecker presented Ms. Iadevaia with a crystal engraved award recognizing her 8 years of service to CHNEP, in light of her departure at the end of January.

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

The Consent Agenda outlined several key items for approval by the CHNEP Policy Committee, including the September 25th, 2025 Policy Committee meeting minutes, new CAC applicants, updated CHNEP Monitoring Strategy, updated CHNEP Communications and Outreach Strategy, updated Finance Strategy, CHNEP Amended FY26 Master Work Plan and Budget, and the Amended CHNEP Charlotte County MOU.

CHNEP continues recruiting to fill CAC vacancies across its 10-county area, with three new applicants (from Charlotte, Polk, and Hendry counties) completing requirements and recommended for Policy Committee approval. The 2025 Comprehensive Conservation & Management Plan (CCMP) was approved by the Policy Committee and US EPA, with EPA requesting updates to the Monitoring, Communications & Outreach, and Finance Strategy appendices. Committees reviewed and updated all three strategies, incorporating new science, best practices, funding approaches, and equity-focused outreach goals, and unanimously recommended Policy Committee approval. CHNEP received FY26 EPA 320 funds and has significant carryover funding, enabling a call for projects. Nineteen proposals from six counties were evaluated, resulting in over $1 million available for new projects, with additional reallocated funds from delayed vulnerability assessments. This allows funding of at least one new project in each participating county. These projects are incorporated into the FY26 EPA 320 Work Plan and Budget through multiple table and narrative amendments reflecting updated funding amounts, project changes, and carryover allocations. The Management Committee unanimously recommended approval of the amended Work Plan. Additional amendments include staff role adjustments to address increased project workload and updates to the CHNEP–County MOU to clarify negotiation authority and align federal reporting requirements with current EPA standards.

A member asked if CAC applicants need to live in the county that he or she will be representing on the Committee and Ms. Hecker answered that he or she must either live *or* work in the specified county. Another member asked about how CHNEP deal with a third party sampling data and Ms. Hecker stated that that data sources are treated and handled differently with CHNEP using only quality controlled used for analysis – though all is shown on the Atlas with sampling entity identifier.

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

Agenda Item #7 — Blue Green Mitigation Strategies and Technologies — Barry Rosen, PhD, Florida Gulf Coast University

Barry Rosen, PhD, from Florida Gulf Coast University, shared with the Committee some of the latest findings regarding cyanobacteria mitigation techniques. Highlights are as follows:

Cyanobacteria, or blue-green algae, can form harmful algal blooms (HABs) that produce toxins affecting people, animals, and ecosystems, and have repeatedly impacted Central and Southwest Florida. In response, Florida's Blue-Green Algae Task Force (2019–2024) concluded that excess nutrients—primarily from agriculture, wastewater, septic systems, stormwater runoff, and legacy nutrients—are the main drivers of blooms, with impacts intensified by land-use changes and climate change. While emphasizing nutrient-reduction prevention strategies, the Task Force also recommended investing in a diverse, cost-effective, environmentally safe, and scalable set of innovative technologies to mitigate blooms. Reflecting this, the CHNEP Policy Committee added Water Quality Action 5.2 to the 2025 CCMP to reduce HABs through early detection and mitigation methods, and the presentation will highlight current research on cyanobacteria control, including proven, ineffective, and promising emerging technologies needing further study.

One member said that about 8 years ago, the Surgeon General at the time was arguing that the EPA's recreational water quality criteria was based on ingestion from rats and a controlled environment and wasn't based on some sort of epidemiology exposure system, and the argument was that the state of Florida needed to develop a better way to calibrate recreational exposure. He asked if Dr. Rosen knew what the status is currently. Dr. Rosen said that the used to test children's urine after being in a swimming pool to determine their exposure levels. They haven't figured out much from ingestion or even aero solation, which is even more appropriate. Dr. Rosen said that he doesn't believe that they have that skill set yet or have even pursued one. The member then

asked if the state was going to adopt the EPA recreational guidelines and Dr. Rosen said that it has. If water quality is questionable, they will post signs out of an abundance of caution. A member said that we know that Karenia brevis has a deactivation temperature and wondered if we see the same thing with blue green algae because he noticed plenty of blooms in the river today even though temperatures have dropped. Dr. Rosen said that the temperature threshold just allows them to grow fast. Some of them can fix their own atmospheric nitrogen, regardless of how nitrogen is treated on land. We need nitrogen and every protein in your body has nitrogen. There are many species of bacteria, that have specialized self-fixing atmospheric nitrogen. They have been around for 3.5 billion years, and they know how to adapt because they have a huge history of genetics and a lot of success.

Another member said that his city has made some considerable investments in bubble curtains, and they thought that they were doing good. Also, some of the HOAs in his area are utilizing micro bubble current narrators. He asked Dr. Rosen what he thought the effectiveness of these were. Dr. Rosen said that any kind of aeration where you're moving the water around will disrupt the pattern of what the organisms want to do. They want stagnant waters, so they can move up and down quiescent waters in the river, such as any marina where there are quiescent waters will really support them. The nano bubbles or micro bubbles people are using that oxygenates the water are good. It circulates the water. As for nano bubble curtains, Dr. Rosen said that he hasn't studied them so he would want samples on both sides over a period of time to figure out if what's getting through, if anything. The member said that his city has a huge irrigation system, and they have eliminated phosphorus and nitrogen in off season times. They thought they were doing a good job on that, but they still have emulsion conditions, such as everyone mulches and some of the mulch is getting into the system. Dr. Rosen said that he doesn't know how much nutrients would be in bark which is mulch. He said that there probably isn't that much, and it would be tied up in the biomass. Dr. Rose said that if you can control your phosphorus and nitrogen, that's what's critical.

Another member asked if there is a generic salinity threshold when blue green algae splice in the river itself because he can sometimes see blooms where he's at and that it doesn't seem to persist downstream. Dr. Rosen said that when the big bloom happened in Lake Okeechobee in 2016, the USACE funded a project with him to look at salinity threshold where he was taking samples and looking at how Microcystis responded. They went all the way up to 35 parts per 1,000. One of the first things that Microcystis did in response was to start excreting more and more mucilage. The colonies were surrounded by mucilage which protects them, but they get to the point where they're putting all their energy into making mucilage that it cuts back on photosynthesis. The threshold that he found was about 18 parts per thousand and they start feeling the effects at 10 parts 1,000. When you look at local spermum, a much more delicate organism, but a worse toxin producer (neurotoxins) they have a much lower threshold, and they also make extra mucilage. Organisms are probably alive at 18, but they're dying out and unhealthy, and diverted from what they normally do. Anything above 10 starts to stress them and when they stress, it is unknown what pathway they will go down (hopefully not making more toxin).

Another member asked if there is there a marine algae guide that Dr. Rosen recommends. Dr. Rosen said that if he is talking about plankton or seaweeds, there isn't but Dr. Rosen is considering composing one in the future as he has already done a freshwater version (which he is updating – around 500 pages).

Another member mentioned a blue green algae task force from a few years ago and wondered if Dr. Rosen had heard anything about establishing a new task force. Dr. Rosen said that the previous task force involved a lot of administrative tasks, and it didn't really target nutrients but was focused on septic to sewer. They don't do the selection of the innovative tech projects that the governor has been paying for. The task force would need to be focused on what can be done as far as the nutrients in the watershed and the expertise is there.

Agenda Item #8 — Red Tide and Lake Okeechobee Management — Lenny Landau, Presenter

Lenny Landau shared with the Committee updated research findings related to the recently adopted and implemented LOSOM protocols and possible benefits to reducing conditions favorable for long, severe red tide events. Highlights are as follows:

Karenia brevis causes red tide harmful algal blooms on Florida's Gulf Coast, producing brevetoxins that harm marine life, irritate human respiratory systems, and have caused major economic losses, including an estimated $2.7 billion from the 2017–2019 event. In response, CHNEP added Water Quality Action 5.2 to the 2025 CCMP to support early detection and mitigation of harmful algal blooms. Recent research, including a study co-authored by CHNEP staff, shows that nutrient loading—particularly nitrogen—from Lake Okeechobee discharges to the Caloosahatchee River is the highest among regional rivers and contributes to longer, more severe red tide events, while reduced nitrogen lessens red tide intensity. The presentation highlighted new findings on how the recently adopted LOSOM protocols may help reduce conditions that favor prolonged and severe red tide events.

Ms. Hecker added that this underscore how hydrological restoration can improve water quality and the relationship of doing what can be done with regards to water management to restore more natural ways of managing the water can have positive benefits ecosystem (such as potentially reducing severe long term, red tide events). She noted that it is early with LOSOM implementation so time will tell. There were some other factors going on mostly in effect for a short while, and there hasn't been a lot of rain and there weren't any hurricanes this past season. However, it is known that discharges from Lake Okeechobee coming out of the Caloosahatchee River affects red tide, which can move up and down the whole west coast. Ms. Hecker also noted that half of the nutrient load comes from the Caloosahatchee basin itself, so basin projects are also needed. CHNEP spends a lot of time and energy doing hydrological restoration and nutrient control projects in the basin as well. All those things combined are what it takes to address these types of big regional issues.

Dr. Rosen offered that Karenia brevis doesn't like fresh water. Ms. Hecker asked Dr. Rosen about the discussion regarding the relationship of blue green algae coming out of the Lake down the river when red tide is present and how that interacts. Dr. Rosen said that he doesn't think there is a direct correlation but as blue green algae die, nutrients are recycled and available for *Karenia* to take advantage of as it does any nutrients, whether they be organic, fish, etc., when they are released. Dr. Rosen also said that there is no way to really regulate the Lake which is 30 miles wide and 10 feet deep on average. With LOSOM, during special operations in November-December 2024, when they released billions of gallons of water because the Lake was so high for so long, they killed almost all submerged by vegetation. The vegetation is starting to come back. They are trying to pull out nutrients, so they don't get downstream, but it is tricky to control. If the Lake has 5 feet of rainfall and/or 5 feet of evaporation per year, then you check how much is coming from the Caloosahatchee. They have started releasing from S-77, which is at the mouth in Moore Haven so there is more fresh water supply coming down the Caloosahatchee. They must do that as there is a minimum flow level for feeding that fresh water.

Agenda Item #9 — Policy Committee Member Updates — Craig Hesterlee, Co-Chair

Jamie Wolanin (FWC): FWC organized and hosted a few Lake Okeechobee listening sessions recently. Hopefully, people used these opportunities to speak up about issues related to the Lake. The Division of Fisheries Marine Management will be presenting the recommended changes for the spotted sea trout management at the February Commission meeting which will be the final ruling on that issue. The May Commission meeting will be held in Fort Myers with the agenda being available closer to the date. As for the Aquatic Habitat Conservation and Restoration section,

we are in the middle of ranking and reviewing restoration products that were submitted by biologists that work around the state. The Southwest team is meeting tomorrow so hopefully projects that biologists in the region submitted will be approved so that more restoration will be funded in this area.

Phil Flood (SFWMD): We are imploring people to try to conserve water wherever they can. We started the dry season after a dryer than normal rainy season and we have drought conditions all around. Most of the counties have burn bans in place. We just want to remind everyone to be cognizant of their water use. The rainy season doesn't start till late May/early June. Currently, some of our aquifers are not in great condition. It is important to be cognizant of the water you use and conserve where you can.

Dawn Ritter (Highlands County): I would also emphasize water conservation. Highlands County is working on a Ridge to River Project. It is a referendum and will be on the ballot in November 2026. This is about conservation land and hopefully help in cultural easements, anything people would like to see for conservation purposes. Many other counties already have these types of programs. It was very impactful for green space and water quality. We obtained a grant from Department of Permits Support Mission, which allows us to buy up some parcels for conservation efforts. We are also working on a water quality – water quantity grant that will highlight areas in the county that if there's flooding, the community can opt to deny building in those areas. Hopefully, we will work hand in hand with our Ridge to River program.

Elizabeth Sweigert (FDEP): Our South district office in Fort Myers is having an open house on Thursday, February the 19th from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm. Everyone is welcome to stop in and meet our staff, and our permitting compliant staff. It is about the various program areas that we oversee.

Justin Mahon (Fort Myers): The City received the Lee County Vulnerability Assessment in December. We are currently reviewing the content to decide if the City will be doing its own vulnerability assessment based on the priorities from the county assessment. Hopefully we will have an idea where that's going soon and partner with CHNEP utilizing any of its guidelines. The City is nearing completion of its first wastewater deep injection well at one of our two wastewater facilities. It is part of a $343 million dollar surface water discharge mitigation project which will eliminate discharge to the Caloosahatchee River and the nutrients associated with it by 2031. That is a partnership with FDEP. The FGCU Water Resources Conference is tomorrow. It is an annual conference hosted by the University and City staff will be speaking.

Keith Keene/Beth Carsten (Arcadia): The City has received significant funding recently with that money going towards projects that will improve water quality and stormwater control improvements. Our big project is our wastewater treatment plan. We had a 65+ year-old tripling filter, one of the last in the state which was not meeting the requirements of the DEP. We began the design about 3 years ago and are now at 100% design, with the permit applications having been submitted and received. The review is underway. We are looking for at the bid and construction phase. We were able to secure 100% grant funding for this project. Another big project is our systems retrofit project. After Hurricane Ian, FEMA came in and gave us technical assistance and a free design for moving forward. One of the biggest discoveries that came from that was issue that the wastewater plant was having with nutrients. They focused on an old well and turned it into aeration with comb oxygen air which completely remove the issues that we have and allows us to have connections until our newest water planet design is finished. We are looking to begin construction in about 6 to 8 months. We have had more growth in our community in 25 years. We have a moratorium on connections, but we have had a few. While we are doing all these big infrastructure changes, we are also in the middle of a complete rebuild all our underground. We are fixing the plant and fixing the distribution pipes. We have hundred-year-old clay sewer pipes, and they are a broken mess. We are about 60% complete on that. It is a big undertaking, but we are receiving assistance from agencies such as DEP and Florida Commerce. Along with all of this,

we also have the DeSoto County Vulnerability Assessment taking place. I just want to say thank you to CHNEP and CFRPC because that helps us to be able to really see what questions need to be answered.

Jennifer Codo-Salisbury (CFRPC): We are working with DeSoto, Hendry, Hardee, and Highlands County on their vulnerability assessments and continuing the effort with implementation of projects through the funding and partnership with CHNEP. We are looking to wrap that up by June. We also are working on a regional resiliency tool kit for the Heartland. We have one military installation, the Avon Park Air Force Range, and we are in a partnership with the Department of War on the Military Installation Readiness Review. There will be some significant impact to water quality as well.

Chadd Chustz (Fort Myers Beach): We finished our beach renourishment and did our dune planting of about a hundred and seventy thousand dune plants. There are still many recovery projects on Fort Myers Beach.

Dustin Everitt (Winter Haven): Recently, the City was able to acquire a 152-acre parcel that has some important wetlands that are attached to the northern Winter Haven Chain of Lakes. This area has several lakes that flow into this wetland and then downward throughout the Chain. We will be doing some restoration efforts in that area. This was an important acquisition for the City because it was owned by corporation who had been trying to sell it for development. We were able to partner with Polk County, who contributed to the purchase, and we have just closed on that. We are making some assessments of the wetland itself and are seeing what kind of improvements we can make there. It is just recognizing the importance of this not only locally but regionally because we are at the top of the basin and recognize that the quality of water that we are sending impacts everyone downstream.

Jeff Hunt (Estero): My district encompasses much of the Estero River. The Village has agreed to funding the removal and connection to sewer for two of the mobile home communities, one of which is immediately adjacent to the river. That took a good deal of effort in working with those communities because our funding for both of those will be about $1.3 million, and that's only 25% of the cost. The communities themselves felt that it was very important to the value of their communities and the river itself to fund those projects. We also agreed to funding about $1.6 million recently for the design and permitting of West Broadway, which is kind of parallel to the river on the north, which will ultimately result in the utility extension project to connect all the single-family homes that are down along the river for quite some time. Our Cypress Bend communities have already been hot tapped into the sewer system.

John King (Fort Myers Beach): Thank you for the approval of the consent agenda regarding the Town of Fort Myers Beach stormwater project. Hopefully we can continue to move forward on that.

Vivianna Bendixson (SWFWMD): The District is now in peer review for the Upper Peace (River) minimum flows and levels. Those meetings have been set and everybody is welcome to attend and hear the discussion. There will be a public workshop that is planned in the spring after the peer review and those comments are taken into consideration. More information is available on the SWFWMD website. Our seagrass mapping effort is underway, and we will be mapping the estuaries in what we call the Sun Coast. We anticipate it to be a long process. The first imagery run is done and is under review. They may need to re-fly over some areas. That will be under review, and we anticipate those maps being available in a year cause because it is a lengthy process to go through and ensure that the imagery is up to date and meets all the quality standards. We fly and map the Sun Coast every two years so this will capture post-2024 storm season which will be interesting to see. We are hoping that there is not a continuation of the reduction of seagrass in Charlotte Harbor and that it has held steady. As we have that information, we will make it available and bring it to the Technical Advisory Committee for a full presentation. We have the Cape Haze

restoration project that is out for bid with a mandatory rebid set for January 27th. It is about a million-dollar restoration project which the District is investing in about 410 acres in the region with a large NOAA grant that we were successful in obtaining. We are moving forward on that and will bring forward any updates with that project.

Ryan Ellis (Polk County): We are working on a lot of projects on the Peace River. We were awarded a grant from the Department of Commerce to do some further wetland restorations along the Peace River as well as in different areas of the Winter Haven Chain of Lakes on the other headwater areas.

Rebekah Harp (SWFRPC): The Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council's LEPC sponsored Sarasota County's HazMat Team to attend to attend the Annual Hazmat Symposium and they brought home 3rd place in the National HazMat Competition. The SWFRPC will hold a focused Brownfields discussion at its March 19th meeting, followed by hosting a Brownfields Forum on April 22nd from 10:00 am to 12:00 pm. In addition, the SWFRPC will hold its 2nd Resiliency Webinar on March 25th.

Agenda Item #10 — Public Comment — Craig Hesterlee, Co-Chair

There were no comments from the public.

Agenda Item #11 — Future Meeting Date and Topics — Craig Hesterlee, Co-Chair

Contact jhecker@chnep.org if you would like any topics added to future agendas. The next meeting date is May 28th, 2026.

Agenda Item #12 — Adjourn – Craig Hesterlee, Co-Chair

Meeting was adjourned at m.