CHNEP Policy Committee Meeting
Thursday, May 28, 2026, 9:00 AM – 1:00 PM
1100 Loveland Blvd., Port Charlotte, FL 33980

Policy Committee Draft Meeting Minutes

Members Present:

Craig Hesterlee	US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 4
Elizabeth Sweigert	Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP)
Allie McCue	Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)
Jennifer Codo-Salisbury	Central Florida Regional Planning Council (CFRPC)
John Hall	Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD)
Chauncey Goss	South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD)
Ken Doherty	Charlotte County
Tim Stanley	Glades County
Tim Wells	Hardee County
Emory Howard	Hendry County
Scott Kirouac	Highlands County
Trish Petrosky	Lee County
Tal Siddique	Manatee County
Tabitha Biehl (alternate)	Polk County
Mark Smith	Sarasota County
Keith Keene	City of Arcadia
Trish Pfeiffer	City of Bartow
Joe Kilraine	City of Cape Coral
Diana Giraldo	City of Fort Myers
Jeannine Polk (alternate)	City of Punta Gorda
Mike Miller	City of Sanibel
Lloyd Weed	City of Venice
Tracy Mercer	City of Winter Haven
John R. King	Town of Fort Myers Beach
Melynda Brown	CHNEP Management Committee Co-Chair

Others Present:

Jennifer Hecker	Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP)
Michelle McGill	Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP)
Keara Abel	Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP)
Vivianna Bendixson	Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD)
Kristine Morris	Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP)
Allison Tritschler	Jacobs

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

Policy Committee Co-Chair Elizabeth Sweigert called the meeting to order at 9:00 am. Introductions were then made.

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

No additions or deletions were made to the agenda.

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

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

No public comments on agenda items were made.

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

Melynda Brown, Management Committee Co-Chair, provided a briefing from the last Management Committee Meeting held on May 8th, 2026. Highlights are as follows:

The Management Committee met on May 8, 2026, chaired by Co-Chair Melynda Brown. The Committee first received a report from the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), where members elected Stefan Kalev of the City of North Port as the new TAC Co-Chair. TAC members heard presentations on harmful algal blooms and red tide research, including findings from the Nutrients & Red Tide State of the Science Symposium. Discussion focused on coordination between state and federal harmful algal bloom efforts, local application of research findings, the potential impacts of deep-well injection, and the readiness of red tide forecasting models for emergency management use. Additional TAC presentations addressed water quality monitoring and environmental data tools. Dr. Richard Whitman presented research on microbial source tracking and fecal indicator bacteria in Charlotte Harbor canal systems, prompting discussion on bacteria sources, rainfall impacts, oyster health, beach closures, and water quality management programs. Members also received an update on new features within the CHNEP Water Atlas, including enhanced mapping tools, expanded basin information, improved water-quality data visualization, real-time streamflow monitoring, and updates to the Lake Okeechobee and Caloosahatchee Estuary Tracker.

The Committee then heard a report from the Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC), where Aaron Zimmermann was unanimously re-elected to a second term as CAC Co-Chair. The CAC welcomed a new applicant, Courtney Darling, to represent DeSoto County and reviewed four Conservation Grant applications. Members supported fully funding a community-based water quality monitoring project and partially funding a canal restoration project, while two other proposals were not funded due to budget limitations and eligibility requirements. Conservation and wildlife issues were a major focus of the CAC discussions. Presentations highlighted new research supporting Florida panther conservation and habitat connectivity, emphasizing the importance of wildlife corridors, transportation planning, and conservation partnerships. Members expressed strong support for wildlife crossings and discussed concerns regarding outdated panther population data and ongoing habitat loss. A second presentation examined roadkill hotspots and strategies for reducing wildlife-vehicle collisions through improved data collection and targeted mitigation measures. The CAC also held a discussion on living with wildlife, focusing on public education, reducing human-wildlife conflicts, and developing outreach materials to provide residents with resources for coexisting safely with wildlife.

The Management Committee reviewed CHNEP program updates as well as the proposed FY27 Work Plan and Budget. Members suggested several minor corrections to the document and discussed the organization's reserve funding levels. Staff emphasized that, despite maintaining reserves equivalent to one year of operations, current funding uncertainties and rising operational costs justify continuing to strengthen reserves to ensure long-term organizational stability.

Following discussion, the Committee unanimously recommended approval of the revised FY27 Work Plan and Budget for consideration by the Policy Committee. The meeting also included presentations on Florida's water supply challenges and innovative approaches to water resource management. Representatives from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection discussed how growing water demands are being met through both traditional and alternative water sources while protecting natural resources. Members discussed water use associated with data centers, regional water supply planning, and water conservation programs. A final presentation explored the use of wetlands as a multi-benefit tool for enhancing both water supply and water quality. Discussion focused on groundwater recharge, nutrient management, and emerging technologies for addressing contaminants such as PFAS. The meeting concluded with member updates for their respective areas.

There were no Policy Committee comments or questions.

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

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

Since the beginning of the previous Management Conference cycle, CHNEP staff planned and executed all major committee meetings, including Technical Advisory, Citizens Advisory, Management, and Policy Committee meetings, while coordinating presenters, preparing technical materials, maintaining committee webpages, developing presentations, documenting proceedings, and managing follow-up communications. Organizational restructuring was approved to create a Research & GIS Manager position and a Restoration Manager position, strengthening program capacity. CHNEP also welcomed numerous new members to its Policy, Management, and Citizens Advisory Committees, while continuing recruitment efforts to expand stakeholder representation. Key strategic documents supporting the 2025 Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP)—including the Monitoring, Finance, and Communications & Outreach Strategies—were finalized, approved by committees, and submitted to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Additional administrative accomplishments included updating governmental contact databases, distributing CCMPs to federal legislators, submitting FY27 appropriations requests, and participating in national EPA and National Estuary Program meetings in Washington, D.C., where federal support for continued NEP funding was reinforced.

Financial and grants management activities focused on securing, administering, and tracking funding from multiple sources. CHNEP received and executed FY26 grant agreements with the EPA, Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD), and Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), while successfully completing reimbursement requests, quarterly reporting requirements, invoice reviews, contract amendments, and grant closeout activities. Staff maintained oversight of ongoing monitoring and Water Atlas projects, processed annual partner dues and private donations, distributed funding opportunity information to partners, and coordinated with county grants personnel to ensure compliance and financial accountability across all funded initiatives.

CHNEP staff continued to expand scientific collaboration and knowledge sharing through presentations and technical outreach. Program representatives highlighted CHNEP-funded resilience, water quality, and monitoring projects at regional and statewide forums, including the South Florida Water Management District Resiliency Coordination Forum, the Visiting Scientist Webinar Series, and the University of Florida Water Institute Symposium. Staff also provided

training on the CHNEP Water Atlas to community partners, demonstrating how long-term environmental monitoring data can support resource management, public education, and decision-making throughout the watershed.

Public outreach and community engagement remained a major focus during the reporting period. Monthly newsletters, Constant Contact email campaigns, and social media content promoted environmental stewardship opportunities, volunteer events, and partner activities throughout the 10-county region. CHNEP finalized its FY26 Outreach Event Calendar and participated in numerous festivals and educational events, including Water, Wings, and Wild Things, Wings Over Water, the Civilian Conservation Corps Festival, and the Sustainable Kids Fishing Clinic. These events engaged hundreds of students, families, and community members through hands-on learning activities focused on bird conservation, water quality, habitat stewardship, and environmental awareness. Staff also sponsored the Burrowing Owl Festival, prepared educational materials for the Everglades Coalition Conference, and continued promoting awareness campaigns associated with World Wetlands Day, I Heart Estuaries, and the Great Backyard Bird Count.

Through its Conservation Grants Program, CHNEP reviewed and evaluated four grant applications and awarded funding to three projects supporting environmental restoration, education, and stewardship. Grants included $5,000 to Keep Lee County Beautiful for community litter removal efforts, $3,315 to Sarasota Bay Watch for marine stewardship educational programming, and $8,971.54 to Calusa Land Trust for invasive species removal and habitat restoration on newly acquired conservation lands. Additional outreach accomplishments included updating committee bylaws, printing resource packets for committee members, revising educational fact sheets, and developing new project fact sheets highlighting upcoming restoration and resilience initiatives funded through EPA and Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) resources.

Digital communications and public information resources also saw significant enhancements. CHNEP updated website content, improved mobile accessibility, expanded online conservation grant resources, uploaded newly approved strategic documents and publications, and refreshed vulnerability assessment and adaptation planning webpages. New educational materials and tracking tools were developed for Lake Okeechobee and the Caloosahatchee Estuary, while project fact sheets were updated or created for numerous county resilience, restoration, and habitat improvement projects. Digital engagement metrics remained strong, with 5,452 educational mailing subscribers, 2,466 unique website visitors generating 3,209 page views, 649 Instagram followers, 2,078 Facebook followers, and a growing YouTube presence totaling 19,719 views, 115 subscribers, and 360 videos. Collectively, these accomplishments demonstrate CHNEP's continued commitment to effective program management, environmental stewardship, scientific collaboration, community engagement, and regional conservation planning.

There were updates on Task 3 Research Coordination activities supporting CCMP Work Plan objectives, including continued region-wide data collection, reporting, and access to water quality information; ongoing assessment of water quality status and trends; and support for vulnerability assessment and adaptation planning efforts. Under the Coastal Charlotte Harbor Monitoring Network, Q2 data collection was completed and submitted, with Q3 FY26 sampling underway. The updated Quality Assurance Project Plan (QAPP) was approved by EPA, and all related data continues to be made available through the CHNEP Water Atlas and SEACAR. The CHNEP Water Atlas maintenance project, led by the University of South Florida, completed Q2 updates and began Q3 activities, including enhancements to water quality visualization tools and the addition of Total

Organic Carbon and True Color parameters. Vulnerability assessment and adaptation planning efforts are progressing across multiple counties. Charlotte County has largely completed its baseline Comprehensive Vulnerability Assessment, with remaining work focused on exposure and sensitivity analysis and identification of Adaptation Focus Areas and strategies. Polk County completed additional flood modeling scenarios, including extreme and compound flooding conditions, with upcoming review and approval meetings scheduled. Highlands, Hardee, and DeSoto Counties have identified Adaptation Action Areas and are developing draft plans. Sarasota County's RFP process is underway, with a recommended award anticipated in early June. Manatee County continues to develop its project scope and interlocal agreement, while Glades County has initiated procurement following scope finalization. Additional regional projects include the Water Quality Trend Assessment and dashboard tool, which is nearing contract finalization and will begin upon approval, and the Peace River Basin Water Pollution Hotspot Assessment, which was selected for FY26 funding and will begin planning in June.

Under Task 4 Watershed Coordination, multiple restoration and resilience projects are advancing across the region. The Pine Island Flatwoods Preserve restoration is under construction with completion expected June 27. The Tiki Point Harborwalk Living Shoreline and Yucca Pens Hydrologic Restoration projects are both in contract finalization stages following consultant and contractor selection. The Submerged Aquatic Vegetation restoration initiative has been selected for funding and is in planning stages. Additional projects include the Lee County Seascapes Project and Warm Mineral Springs Habitat Restoration, both of which have executed interlocal agreements and are preparing for procurement and implementation. Polk County's Lake Idyl sediment inactivation project, Charlotte County's Exceptional Ponds Initiative, and Hardee Lakes Habitat Enhancement project have all been selected for FY26 funding and are preparing for kickoff. The Fort Myers Beach stormwater planning project is progressing through interlocal agreement review prior to implementation. CHNEP also continues to develop science communication materials including fact sheets on project overviews, basin water quality, seagrass health, and funding opportunities. CHNEP staff further reported ongoing severe drought conditions across Southwest Florida, including emergency water withdrawal orders and water shortage warnings issued by regional water management authorities and local governments.

One member asked if there have been noticeable differences caused by the drought seen in the current water quality sampling data. Ms. Hecker said that most sampling data goes through a quality sampling-quality control (QA/QC) process that unfortunately takes a few months for the final data to be verified. There is, however, anecdotal data from scientists in the area and when water slows or stops, stagnant water can incubate and grow algae. For instance, Shell Creek has never seen mats from algae but because the water is not going over the dam from the reservoir, large-scale mats have formed in Shell Creek. Algae growth can lower oxygen levels too low to support aquatic life. Another member mentioned the concerns they are having about the limited release coming from Lake Okeechobee going westward to some coastal estuaries being extremely restricted due to drought conditions. On a positive note, this area has benefited from 3,000 connections from the UEP (Utilities Extension Project). Residents can now water and irrigate once per week. Ms. Hecker mentioned that on CHNEP's Water Atlas, there is a Lake Okeechobee tracker, and people can scroll to any date to see what is coming out of the Lake and how it compares to the minimum/maximum ecological flows. Another member mentioned the hot spots in the Peace River and whether there would be a document generated from the planned study. He also referenced the red tide study that Ms. Hecker published with Steve Suau and whether that information had been integrated into information relative to the Caloosahatchee and the duration

of the red tide. Ms. Hecker said that the red tide study looked at the Peace, Myakka, and Caloosahatchee River systems to do a statistical analysis to see where there was a correlation with severe long-term red tide events - finding the strongest correlation by far was the Caloosahatchee. As far as the hot spot analysis is concerned, CHNEP is working with stakeholders to convene a working group to do the scoping of that project and will be looking at producing a technical report of the findings. Another member asked if the City of Punta Gorda and its residents would be able to review the Charlotte County Vulnerability Assessment and Ms. Hecker said City staff were contacted and invited to a recent public meeting that was just held in Punta Gorda.

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

The Consent Agenda outlined several key items for approval by the CHNEP Policy Committee, including the January 22nd, 2026 Policy Committee meeting minutes, one CHNEP Citizens Advisory Committee application from Ms. Courtney Darling, and the CHNEP Citizens Advisory Committee Bylaws update.

JOE KILRAINE MOVED, SECONDED BY KEN DOHERTY, TO APPROVE THE CONSENT AGENDA. THE MOTION WAS UNANINMOUSLY APPROVED WITH NO FURTHER DISCUSSION.

Agenda Item #7 — CHNEP FY27 Work Plan and Budget — Jennifer Hecker, CHNEP Executive Director

CHNEP's Executive Director, Ms. Jennifer Hecker, presented CHNEP's FY27 Work Plan and Budget. Highlights are as follows:

For Fiscal Year 2027, CHNEP has prepared a Master Work Plan and Budget that outlines anticipated revenues, expenses, and projects for the coming year. The purpose of this agenda item is to present the proposed plan to the Management Committee for review, comment, and recommendation to the Policy Committee for approval. Upon Policy Committee approval, the final EPA Section 320 Work Plan and Budget will be submitted with the FY27 EPA grant application through Grants.gov by the June 1, 2026 deadline.

Several changes are proposed compared to the approved FY26 budget. Personnel funding, which was reduced last year from $669,810 to $525,000 due to the elimination of two unfilled entry-level positions, is proposed to increase to $570,000 in FY27. This increase reflects the receipt of full FY26 Section 320 funding and final Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) funding. Organizational restructuring also allows for the reintroduction of the Finance and Grants Specialist position while maintaining sustainable staffing levels. The staffing structure now supports the growing number of projects CHNEP manages across its ten-county service area. Administrative overhead costs are proposed to increase slightly from $246,120 to $256,000, reflecting additional human resources, information technology, and operational support costs associated with the expanded staffing structure. Public outreach funding will increase from $94,500 to $109,500 to support the printing and reprinting of educational materials, including CHNEP's popular children's activity books. In addition, dues for policymaker education through the Association of National Estuary Programs will increase from $4,500 to $9,500 following a majority vote of program directors. The FY26 IIJA award of $909,800 has recently been received and will be used to support research and restoration initiatives once approved by the host agency. Additional FY27 funding allocations include $112,000 from EPA Section 320 funds for Water Atlas maintenance

and improvements, $20,000 in local funds for project contingency costs, and $15,000 in local funds for the Lower Coastal Charlotte Harbor Monitoring Network water quality sampling program. Together, these allocations increase the FY27 Research and Restoration budget by $147,000. To strengthen long-term financial stability, CHNEP will allocate $32,000 in local funds to reserves. The program has already accumulated reserves totaling $852,525.45, equivalent to approximately one year of staff salaries and operating expenses. Overall, the proposed FY27 budget reflects CHNEP's post-IIJA funding level, with total projected revenues and expenditures of $1,124,000.

Following review and discussion, the Management Committee unanimously voted to recommend approval of the Draft FY27 Work Plan and Budget, including three minor edits incorporated during the Management Report.

One member mentioned that with possible fiscal concerns that municipalities may experience, it may not be opportune time for them to increase their member contributions. Ms. Hecker assured the members that CHNEP is not asking for an increase in dues at this time and the contributions in the Work Plan reflect prior contribution levels of dues-paying CHNEP members. She did, however, acknowledge that two cities have voluntarily increased their contributions to CHNEP in the past few years to reach their current levels. Another member mentioned that it is important to create a strategy such as the reserves in the event of a worst-case scenario. Another member mentioned that soil and water conservation district offices may have their own reserves that could possibly be awarded to CHNEP.

MIKE MILLER MOVED, SECONDED BY DIANA GIRALDO, TO APPROVE THE FY27 DRAFT MASTER WORK PLAN AND BUDGET. THE MOTION WAS UNANINMOUSLY APPROVED WITH NO FURTHER DISCUSSION

Agenda Item #8 — Innovative Solutions in Water Supply — Kristine Morris, Florida Department of Environmental Protection

Kristine Morris, the Assistant Deputy Secretary for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, provided an overview of water demands in Florida and how those demands are met with traditional and non-traditional sources. Highlights are as follows:

This presentation provided a comprehensive overview of Florida's growing water demands and the various methods used to meet those needs. As Florida's population continues to increase and economic development expands, the demand for reliable water supplies has become more significant. Traditionally, water needs have been met through groundwater and surface water sources. However, increasing pressure on these resources has led to the development and adoption of non-traditional water sources, such as reclaimed water, desalination, and alternative water supply projects. One Water initiatives were also discussed which promoted the integrated management of all water resources, including drinking water, wastewater, stormwater, groundwater, and surface water. Through collaborative partnerships among utilities, government agencies, environmental organizations, and communities, innovative solutions are being implemented to ensure sustainable water supplies while protecting Florida's valuable natural resources and ecosystems. Despite advances in water supply development, water conservation remains a critical element of any long-term water management strategy. Conservation efforts become especially important during periods of drought, when water resources are under additional stress. Efficient water use by residents, businesses, agriculture, and industry can help reduce demand and preserve available supplies. By adopting new technologies, management practices, and integrated approaches to handling water in all its forms, Florida can better address future water

supply challenges. These strategies not only help meet the needs of a growing population but also support the restoration, protection, and long-term health of the state's rivers, springs, wetlands, estuaries, and other natural ecosystems.

One member said that this presentation was the most precise and concise technical analysis about Florida's water that he has heard in a long time. In his area, there is a confined brackish area and mentioned that there is a plant in San Diego that has probably the most efficient pumping capacity of about 50 million gallons per day, and they have optimized their electrical uptake. They use R-O (reverse osmosis) with the expanded R-O carriages on it. In his area, they have been able to go down to the brackish aquifer - the mid Hawthorne going into the lower Hawthorne. It goes down about 700 feet to pull up the brackets. They also have two R-O plants, with normal capacity of about 40 million gallons per day. It is a great source of water that takes some of the dependance off surface water dependence. He said that some of the issues that they have run into is that they are tapping into the cheap water in the surface water, the top aquifer and depleting it so quickly which is why the R-O plants are performing so well. He said that with his background in chemical engineering, he believes that R-O is the technology for the future. Ms. Morris said that the San Diego location is the biggest facility of its kind and the largest seawater desalination facility is in the Middle East. She said that there are advancements all the time making it less costly and it should be evaluated as a source. That is what the water supply planning process really is designed to do – looking at all potential sources. The planning process is a valuable opportunity to explore what opportunities are out there and the districts have a very transparent process. Another member said that what she's found in her area is that there were many meter readers that were not working correctly and a lot of people were losing water. She said that conservation is about educating the population. They will be installing all new water meters. People will be able to see usage in real time and can turn off water even from another state. Ms. Morris said that DEP has a Water Loss Pilot Program, it is run through the SRF team, and it allows communities, particularly rural ones, to work with potable water and essentially perform an audit and identify where they might be seeing water loss. It is your most cost-effective way to address water loss. DEP pays for this program. AMI meters are eligible for water conservation grants. This is also valuable for irrigation systems. One member discussed whether utilities are discouraged from promoting water conservation because reduced water use can lower revenue. Ms. Morris emphasized that conservation is usually much cheaper than developing alternative water supplies, such as desalination, which require significant construction, operation, and maintenance costs. Utilities are also often required by permits and regulations to meet conservation goals. Another member asked about what happens to the desalination byproducts. Ms. Morris said that the concentrated salt and minerals (brine) must be disposed of, typically through blending, deep-well injection, or other approved methods. While some companies are exploring ways to recover valuable minerals from the brine, these approaches are not yet widely implemented.

Agenda Item #9 — Leveraging Wetlands as a Multi-Benefit One Water Tool for Water Supply and Water Quality Enhancement — Allison Tritschler, Jacobs

Allison Tritschler, a senior technologist in Natural Treatment Systems at Jacobs, provided an overview of water demands in Florida and how those demands are met with traditional and non-traditional sources. Highlights are as follows:

The presentation explained how both constructed and natural wetlands can serve as versatile tools within One Water and alternative water supply strategies. Wetlands can improve water supply reliability, enhance water quality, and support groundwater recharge while also providing

ecological and community benefits such as habitat creation and opportunities for public education. They are effective across a range of hydrogeologic conditions and can be used with reclaimed water, stormwater, or blended sources to strengthen regional water resilience and long-term water security. One key approach described is "infiltreatment wetlands," which are designed to polish water and promote natural infiltration into aquifers where soil and subsurface conditions allow. Examples such as the 4G Ranch Wetlands in Pasco County and the Ocala Wetland Recharge Park demonstrate how these systems can restore depleted aquifers, reduce nutrient pollution, and even support ecosystem restoration like spring recovery, while also functioning as public parks and wildlife habitats. In areas where geological conditions prevent natural infiltration, wetlands can still support groundwater recharge when paired with recharge wells. Projects such as the Flatford Swamp Groundwater Recharge Project and the Dona Bay Restoration Phase 3 Aquifer Recharge Project show how this combined approach can expand water supply capacity, improve reliability, and safely integrate reclaimed water while protecting public health and water quality. Wetlands can also be used to restore degraded natural systems by rehydrating altered wetlands with reclaimed water. Regulatory frameworks in Florida support this approach, enabling projects like the Boot Wetland Treatment System and Blacks Ford Swamp to improve ecological conditions while simultaneously providing wastewater treatment benefits. These examples demonstrate how restored wetlands can serve both environmental restoration and water management goals. Finally, wetlands play an important role in managing surface water flows and improving effluent quality before discharge into rivers and reservoirs. Systems such as the Huie Wetlands in Georgia and the Arcadia Treatment Wetland in Florida illustrate how wetlands can act as natural treatment buffers that reduce nutrients and pollutants while supporting indirect potable reuse and environmental flows. Overall, the presentation emphasized that wetlands are a key infrastructure strategy for integrating water supply, water quality improvement, and ecosystem restoration under a unified One Water framework.

Ms. Hecker commented that what both presentations tell us is that we need to store and treat more water from when and where there is too much to when and where there is too little. It is all about storage and treatment. Reclaimed water is only used during the dry season, with it being generated and disposed of in the wet season where the nutrient-laden water can be problematic for other surface waters. Historically, it would go into a stormwater pond that would flow off into a Class 3 swimmable, fishable water. The problem is a lot of times the storm water ponds weren't really designed to provide additional treatment. One member said that there is an interesting paradox about the reclaimed water because in Venice and Sarasota County, there are water restrictions. It also restricts water and using reclaimed water which means now it's a strain in the reclaimed water retention areas. Another member stated that all the different sources of water like stormwater and utilities water are held in silos. She stated that often, elected officials and even staff don't look at it as if it's a part of the whole system. With the whole system, there is a need to provide solutions. What was happening in her area is that they were building a new wastewater treatment plant but there needed to be an update because when they get into rainy season, there is an overabundance of water and only so much can be discharged. She was wondering how it can be addressed with more of systems approach and that maybe there needs to be an educational component produced for staff with all that information. She said that elected officials are the ones that push staff and the city managers into executing solutions. If they don't know what resources might be available, they are always going to be doing the same thing and thinking the same way. Ms. Hecker told the committee that these presentations will be made available and that they may want to view a presentation from a previous cycle where the engineer behind Babcock Ranch talked about how

they brought in a team of engineers, ecologists, and park planners all together to maximize storage and treatment. One member said that his county has been working hard on the "one water" concept. They have spent a lot of money on converting their water reclamation facility to an advanced wastewater treatment. He asked about when looking holistically as a state, where the state is regulation-wise with direct potable reuse (DPR). Ms. Tritschler said that she was just at JEA's direct potable reuse facility in Jacksonville. There was a demonstration plant of 1 million gallons per day, and it is a phenomenal facility. She said that the process is starting but it does require piloting, water data, and there are a lot of treatment components. She also said that it might even be more cost-effective and energy-effective than desalination. Ms. Hecker stated that the One Water Commission gives updates and that this is one of their priorities, and they are working on the legislative end and the regulatory end. Ms. Hecker said that committee members can contact the provided City of Winter Haven contact listed to receive upcoming meeting information that they can join online in. Another member said that in his county, they are getting ready to do an expansion on their sewer plant. The company working on it uses an R-O system (reverse osmosis) and told the county that approval was just received from DEP to discharge right into surface water with this new plant. They were told that the cost will not be any more than a topical system.

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

Lloyd Weed (Venice): Water is a priority for Venice, where an environmental process has been initiated on Deertown Gully and Flamingo Ditch. The City has started a beach renourishment program, under a federal program, which is in the middle of turtle nesting season. Venice is also working on the long-term jetty reconstruction and the impact that it has on the beach and all that erosion. Finally, the City is moving forward on an additional desalination plant to augment low water sources, but the City is still in a very good position as far as water availability is concerned. The City is planning for the future and fortunately is in close proximity to sea water.

Tim Stanley (Glades County): Glades County is working on a sewer project and SFWMD is currently doing the mucking. There is also a big water project going on with Lake Hicpochee and the County is expanding its wetland storage.

Tim Wells (Hardee County): The County is starting to see some considerable growth but does not have the infrastructure that will support that growth. There are new homes being constructed that are on city water but have septic tanks. It is not ideal planning from that perspective, but the County is still trying to keep up with it. The Peace River is low.

Emory Howard (Hendry County): As for the G Road Citrus Storage Project that the County is looking to start, it is the hope that CHNEP will look over the details, offer feedback, and maybe provide a letter of support.

Ken Doherty (Charlotte County): Charlotte, Sarasota, Manatee and DeSoto Counties are members of the Peace River Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority. There is a substantial amount of money coming to PRMRWSA for the expansion project currently underway. The treatment capacity at the Peace River is increasing to up to 24 million gallons per day when the project is completed in 2028, adding a 9-billion-gallon reservoir now under construction to the 6-billion-gallon reservoir already located in DeSoto County. Regarding storage, this is expected to help during anticipated high-flow periods. As far as Charlotte County is concerned, it will receive some funding for the Burnt Store water reclamation facility, but not as much as was requested. The same applies to Westport, which is located on the other side of the Myakka River. Eastport is 85% complete and is progressing from a water quality standpoint. The County is working through its

neighborhood septic-to-sewer project, known as the Ackerman Project. The cost is significant. There will be several meetings going into next year during budget planning. Residents created a municipal service benefit unit for each of these neighborhoods, and that program was initiated a dozen years ago. The goal is to stay around $11,500 per household and then allow repayment over 20 years. The costs have now doubled, and the County is not receiving the state and federal funding it had been hoping for, and that does not appear likely to change. It is becoming increasingly difficult to meet these water quality initiatives due to funding challenges.

Chauncey Goss (SFWMD): May is Water Reuse Month, so the District promotes that along with the grants it has received from FDEP. If anyone within the District is doing a reuse project, they may be able to avail themselves of those grants. There are more applicants than there is funding available. There is a drought that the District is working to manage. The levels of Lake Okeechobee and the flows from the Caloosahatchee are a focus of the District. It manages the Everglades system as an integrated system, so if people do not receive as much water as they want on any given day, it reflects system-wide management. Not everyone will be satisfied at all times, but the District is doing its best with what it has. It is expected to be a Super El Niño year, which is expected to make for an interesting winter. The Lake is low right now, which is beneficial for the Lake and for the District because it has been able to get in and do some plantings and de-mucking. This should help the Lake because its ecology was not in great condition last year when water levels were high. Bringing the Lake down somewhat has been beneficial and may put the District in a good position next year if there is a wet winter.

Scott Kirouac (Highlands County): In 2023, the County faced significant challenges related to the Lake Istokpoga Marsh Watershed Improvement District. Legislation adopted that year effectively defunded the district by prohibiting assessments on agricultural lands, which had previously served as the district's primary funding source through a per-acre assessment. As a result, the 18,000-acre district has operated without funding since July 2023. A temporary solution has been developed and is expected to be finalized in the coming month. Although the District was originally established as both a taxing unit and a benefit unit, it had never been implemented as a taxing unit. With support from local landowners, who independently funded a study to ensure the district's viability, a revised funding structure has been developed. Under this approach, agricultural lands will be assessed through a millage rate based on taxable value, while non-agricultural properties within the district will continue to be assessed on a per-acre basis. The proposed funding model has been well received by stakeholders within the district, who recognize the necessity of maintaining district operations. While the model will provide sufficient revenue to continue routine maintenance and ensure proper water flow throughout the district, it is not expected to generate enough funding to support future capital expenditures. The immediate priority is restoring revenue, maintaining infrastructure, and preserving district operations while exploring long-term partnerships with state and federal agencies. The district was originally intended to include two water storage areas. While the first was completed, the second was never constructed due to funding limitations. Significant infrastructure remains in place and requires ongoing maintenance. With no reserve funds available, the District currently lacks the resources necessary to address major infrastructure needs. The anticipated revenue generated under the temporary solution will at least allow the district to remain operational and provide time to evaluate future options. County leadership does not believe that the intent of the 2023 legislation was to defund watershed improvement districts. Efforts have been made to seek legislative relief through discussions with major landowners and state representatives, including Senator Ben Albritton. However, no progress has been achieved to date. A simple amendment exempting watershed improvement

districts from the legislation could have resolved the issue. In addition to concerns surrounding the watershed district, there is considerable uncertainty regarding potential property tax reforms and their impact on rural and fiscally constrained counties. Such counties lack the revenue base necessary to absorb substantial reductions in property tax revenues. Larger counties have benefited from population growth, development, and increasing property values, while smaller counties remain more vulnerable to revenue fluctuations. The County also received approximately $26 million in federal funding through the American Rescue Plan Act during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because these funds were incorporated into annual budgets and used for major capital projects, county budget increases may appear larger than they are from a taxation standpoint. County officials are concerned that some policymakers may incorrectly interpret these temporary budget increases as evidence of higher local taxation. The issue has generated significant concern among members of the Florida Association of Counties. County leaders recognize that voters may be inclined to support measures that reduce or eliminate property taxes, but many may not fully understand the substantial impacts such changes could have on local government services. Discussions have included the possibility of short-term state assistance through trust funds for fiscally constrained counties; however, such support would likely be temporary. To adapt to potential revenue reductions, counties may need to establish additional municipal service taxing units. State officials have indicated that protections for first responders and law enforcement funding may not be included in proposed reforms. Consequently, counties could be forced to restructure funding mechanisms to maintain essential public safety services. This may also require redirecting resources away from capital projects, such as stormwater improvements, in order to sustain core government functions expected by residents. The County has also been conducting a "Ridge to River" conservation study to evaluate the possibility of asking voters to approve a dedicated funding source for a Conservation Trust Fund. The fund would support the acquisition of conservation easements and conservation lands, as well as projects related to water storage, recreation, and environmental protection. However, concerns exist regarding the timing of such a ballot measure if it coincides with broader property tax initiatives. Voters could potentially support conservation funding while simultaneously approving measures that reduce the general revenue source intended to finance it. County officials are currently evaluating whether the conservation initiative should appear on an upcoming ballot or be delayed until 2028. Given the numerous policy discussions underway at both the state and local levels, additional clarity is expected in the coming months regarding future funding and governance priorities.

Elizabeth Sweigert (FDEP): As a state employee, it is important to hear the perspectives and learn about some of the challenges that committee members face. Even with the ongoing struggles, it is imperative to hear what members have to say.

Mark Smith (Sarasota County): The county has an ESLPP program, the Environmentally Sensitive Lands Protection Program, which is currently on the ballot. The program has been approved and renewed by voters for the past 24 years. The Bee Ridge Road Reclamation Facility recently held its ribbon-cutting ceremony and is now operational. The facility helps reduce the flow of nutrients into Sarasota Bay. The next anticipated project is the Venice Gardens Reclamation Facility, although future financing remains uncertain. Following two hurricanes, Midnight Pass remains open and stable for a relatively young pass. Current understanding is that its long-term stability will become clearer after it has existed for fifteen years. While the pass has shifted somewhat, it is being monitored almost continuously by at least six different agencies. The pass has provided significant benefits to Sarasota Bay. Now that it is an established pass, the county will pursue any necessary measures to ensure that it remains open.

Jennifer Codo-Salisbury (CFRPC): The CFRPC is wrapping up the vulnerability assessments for DeSoto, Hardee, Highlands, and Polk Counties. With great appreciation for CHNEP's partnership, the CFRPC is also able to move forward with adaptation plans, which will be brought to these four counties over the summer. When agencies and local governments work with CHNEP, they often feel they have the organization's full attention. It is impressive how much CHNEP does to coordinate efforts and facilitate meaningful progress. The CFRPC will also be co-hosting a grant session with technical staff from local governments in the region that overlap with CHNEP. Many key staff members have been invited, and numerous resources are available. The goal is to take advantage of as many opportunities as possible, especially given the variety of environments across the region. It is grant-writing season, with FDEP grants, opportunities available through CHNEP, and other funding sources. During last year's session, Winter Haven shared innovative approaches and projects under consideration. Participants learned from one another, and it is hoped that, particularly considering limited funding, additional opportunities can be identified and pursued.

Keith Keene (Arcadia): Two of the City's projects were funded at 100% of the budgeted amount, and officials are monitoring their progress. Both projects are related to stormwater management. One approved project, known as the Mills Avenue Project, addresses an area that experiences flooding with even minimal rainfall. Following assessments conducted by FEMA after Hurricane Ian, the City was presented with numerous project opportunities. One particularly promising project is located in downtown Arcadia, where many of the antique stores are situated. This area is prone to flooding, with water often entering businesses through their front doors after relatively small rain events. The proposed project includes the installation of permeable parking surfaces along Oak Street and the creation of water gardens to complement the existing bump-outs in the downtown area. This project also remains in the approved phase. City officials are also encouraged by the development of the seven-acre wetland project. The initial groundbreaking has already taken place, and contractors are currently installing the liner and advancing construction activities. Progress is also being made regarding the construction of the new wastewater treatment plant. Although there have been some setbacks caused by utility companies puncturing water lines, work continues. Installation of sewer infrastructure is advancing, along with the FDOT stormwater project and roadway repaving efforts throughout the community. While accidental line breaks have occasionally left portions of the town without water service, the overall project is substantial and measurable progress is being achieved. City leaders are pleased to see these water quality improvement and stormwater management projects moving forward. As has often been observed, Florida's challenge is not lack of water but rather the ability to convey water to where it is needed. For that reason, opportunities to capture and beneficially manage stormwater are considered extremely important. Officials also remain concerned about property tax revenues. Numerous churches, county facilities, state offices, and other tax-exempt entities are located within the City limits. With only approximately $2 million generated annually through ad valorem taxes, and the police department alone costing nearly $3 million to operate, balancing municipal finances remains a significant challenge. Despite these difficulties, the City continues to make progress.

Diana Giraldo (Fort Myers): The City is dealing with water issues and property tax challenges that affect the entire community. It is a significant struggle. Meetings have been held with all legislators representing the area, and they have been asked to take the time to meet with the City administration to better understand how the budget operates and what impacts it will have. These impacts will be passed on to everyone, including non-homeowners, who may have to pay additional costs as funding is leveraged. A groundbreaking was recently held for the City's wellfield expansion project, which is intended to improve water supply resilience. The expansion of the

wastewater treatment plant is also underway. During the rainy season, the combination of heavy rainfall and system limitations can overwhelm infrastructure, contributing to flooding and restricting the amount of treated water that can be discharged into the Caloosahatchee River. Repairs have been made to local water bodies, including Manuel Branch and Billy's Creek. A man-made filter marsh was created, but it is being impacted due to significant inflows of water from industrial areas in the county. Addressing these issues will require substantial funding and effort. A partnership has been established with the Calusa Water Keepers and the FGCU Water School to begin developing solutions within the City's capacity. Part of this effort includes an educational component. Some trailer parks may have sewer systems that discharge into waterways, contributing to pollution; however, testing access is limited and must be conducted through the state/FDEP. Although the process is lengthy, progress is being made, and an update is expected at the next Policy meeting. Work is also ongoing on the City's stormwater master plan. Stormwater fees must be maintained to support the City's stormwater infrastructure, including all outflows and public systems. Continued progress is expected in addressing these challenges.

Mike Miller (Sanibel): In the year following Hurricane Ian, which made landfall almost four years ago, the team restored the dunes along 15 miles of Gulf beach. The dunes are now being restored for resiliency purposes and for safety considerations, as the recession from 13 feet of storm surge created multiple gullies and depressions that had to be repaired. That work resulted in dune structures averaging about six feet in height, which is roughly one foot higher than their pre-storm condition. The next phase is now underway, which involves planting vegetation to help stabilize those dunes. Approximately 350,000 plants are planned for installation along the 15 miles of beach, primarily sea oats, along with Seacoast Marsh Elder, which is particularly resilient. The project is estimated to cost about half a million dollars and will require approximately 300 easements from property owners. Similar easements were obtained a couple of years ago during the sand renourishment project, so this process is expected to be easier this time. These efforts are intended to increase resilience against future storms. The team is also cooperating with Florida Gulf Coast University on a study examining the implications of sand renourishment from three different sources: sand mines, offshore dredging, and natural sources (i.e., sand from other locations along the beach). Samples collected prior to the sea turtle nesting season in April will be analyzed to evaluate how well each option supports vegetation growth and how they compare in terms of texture, water-holding capacity, and nutrient content. Results are expected next year.

Jeannine Polk: One of the main concerns is flooding, specifically not the Hurricane Helene/Milton type of flooding, but the flooding that occurs with king tides. The area experiences approximately two feet of tide coming up through the drainage system, which is a challenge common to many older coastal towns. When this is combined with an inch or two of rainfall, it can flood not only the business district, making operations very difficult, but also many homes in the historic district. These are ongoing issues that must be addressed. A $745,000 flood study has been initiated; however, such studies are required before grant funding can be accessed. The City is currently working with Kimley-Horn on this 18-month study, which will evaluate existing stormwater management systems, topography, ground cover, and rainfall and tidal data. The findings are expected to assist the City in securing future funding. In addition, the wastewater treatment plant has exceeded its capacity, and during flooding events, untreated sewage has unfortunately been released. The City is in the process of upgrading and improving the facility. Water meter installation is also underway as part of broader infrastructure improvements. Following Hurricane Charlie, many impervious surfaces were left in place, including areas that are no longer used as parking lots and remain unused. Property owners have been asked to remove these surfaces

because they contribute to flooding; replacing them with grass or other permeable ground cover would be beneficial. Some cooperation has been received, while other property owners have objected, noting that these areas have existed for decades. From a financial perspective, the City relies heavily on homestead residential properties for tax revenue and has limited commercial property. There is also limited space for commercial development, which in many larger municipalities or counties is typically a primary source of revenue. Overall, the situation remains uncertain and is a significant concern for the City.

Craig Hesterlee (EPA): The South Florida program grants are in the final selection and approval process and it is expected to start issuing grant notices in the next couple of weeks. It included two financial years' worth of funding for approximately $21 million that will be going out to applicants over the next eight months. That includes $6 million in IIGA funds that will not occur in upcoming years.

John King (Fort Myers Beach): On May 15th, the Town began a truck haul dune restoration project, bringing in 40,000 cubic yards of beach-compatible sand. The goal is to help restore dune elevation and strengthen low-lying areas. The Town expects the project to take approximately 45 days, with completion anticipated by the end of June. The project includes daily sea turtle and shorebird monitoring under permit. It has been authorized in accordance with FWC requirements, and the Town is working with a local agency, Turtle Time, on sea turtle-related monitoring and protection.

John Hall/Vivianna Bendixson (SWFWMD): The District is completing the minimum flow for the upper Peace River. It has gone through peer review, and a public workshop will be scheduled for this summer. This will provide an opportunity to review the plan and submit comments to the District before it is presented to the District's governing board following that meeting. Another update concerns the Cape Haze Ecosystem Restoration Project, which is located on 80 acres within Charlotte Harbor Preserve State Park, just south of Rotonda West. The project has received a $3.7 million grant from NOAA. NOAA has requested additional community education following completion of the project, and the District is working with its communications section to put that in place once the project is finished. The contract is currently being finalized and is expected to begin shortly. A public meeting was held to inform the community about the work being conducted in the Coral Creek area. Two previous phases have already been completed, and this will be Phase 3. The work primarily involves rehydrating wetlands and removing berms that were installed for a community that was never developed. Overall, the project focuses on significant enhancement and restoration in the area.

Trish Petrosky (Lee County): Kiker Preserve CREW Flint Pen is currently in the design process. Although the project is focused on flood mitigation, it is located on six sections of land that will provide opportunities to enhance nearby wetlands and deliver water quality benefits downstream to Estero Bay. The Bob James Preserve Project is under construction and will provide water storage and water quality benefits to the Caloosahatchee. The Palm Creek Filter Marsh project is currently completing the permitting process and will also provide benefits to the Caloosahatchee. Efforts continue to advocate for needed water for the Caloosahatchee Estuary from Lake Okeechobee.

Tal Siddique (Manatee County): The Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council is partnering with the Tampa Bay Estuary Program, which includes a component focused on mapping approximately 2,200 miles of coastline over a four-year period. The effort is centered in the lower part of Tampa

Bay, with the goal of producing a map of coastal vulnerabilities, given that most development and population density is concentrated along the coastline, including within local municipalities. In collaboration with the Regional Planning Council, a vulnerability assessment and vulnerability plan has been developed. This work focuses on identifying flood-prone areas, along with strategies and projects to address them. The Public Works team is also developing basin management plans to better identify, address, and manage flooding concerns in high-growth areas in the eastern and northern parts of the county. These efforts are concentrated in areas where significant growth is occurring, including the urban core and surrounding rapidly suburbanizing regions. In partnership with the Tampa Bay Estuary Program and the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program, several smaller-scale projects are underway, such as living shoreline initiatives. One project has already been completed, involving a short section of shoreline converted from a seawall to a living shoreline. Another project is in progress in Sarasota Bay, where a 100-year-old seawall is being replaced with a living shoreline approach. A comprehensive planning rewrite is currently underway and is scheduled for a vote next week. There is an effort to better understand the implications of the more restrictive and burdensome language in Senate Bill 180, as there has been uncertainty since its passage. The plan includes conservation policies and living shoreline initiatives, with the hope that these provisions will not be interpreted by the state as overly restrictive or burdensome. Private landowners are being encouraged, rather than required, to consider converting seawalls to living shorelines, particularly given that most of the coastline is privately owned. Additionally, 95 acres have been purchased for stormwater retention through the Conservation Program Environmental Lands Management initiative. A millage authorized $50 million in bonding capacity supported by a 0.15 millage rate to repay the bonds, and that capacity has nearly been reached, with only one or two projects remaining. Through a partnership with the Trust for Public Land, the Triton Partnership is commissioning a survey to assess voter interest in an additional millage that could support up to $200 million in bonding capacity for further land acquisitions. There is uncertainty about the survey results, particularly considering concerns about changes to property tax thresholds, including increases from $250,000 to $500,000 exemptions, which could significantly impact funding streams. While rising property values have benefited the community in some ways, they have also created fiscal challenges. As a result, some voter-approved millages may need to be reevaluated or adjusted. The county is working with the Trust for Public Land to understand the survey results and determine whether the governing board would consider placing an additional millage and bonding referendum on the 2026 ballot, depending on public support and voter sentiment regarding taxation for these purposes.

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

There were no comments from the public.

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

Contact jhecker@chnep.org if you would like any topics added to future agendas. Upcoming meetings are September 17, 2026, January 21, 2027, May 20, 2027, & September 16, 2027.

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

Meeting was adjourned at 12:38 pm.