



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
WASHINGTON, O.C. 20460

August 27, 2020

OFFICE OF
WATER

Ms. Jennifer Hecker, Executive Director
Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership
326 West Marion Avenue
Punta Gorda, FL 33950-4416

Dear Ms. Hecker:

The purpose of this letter is to provide the results of the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) 2020 Program Evaluation (PE) and to thank you and the Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership's (CHNEP) staff, as well as your partners, for contributing to the 2020 PE process. We recognize that you put considerable effort into both the PE package and the responses to our follow-up questions.

I would like to note that your evaluation benefited from the voluntary participation of Ms. Joyce Novak, Director, Peconic Estuary Partnership (PEP), who served in an *ex officio* capacity on the PE Team. Ms. Novak's participation provided the Team members (Rachel Hart - EPA Region 4 and Noemi Mercado - EPA Headquarters) with an invaluable National Estuary Program (NEP) perspective. Ms. Novak also shared information about the PEP that may be useful for your Program and took several lessons learned back to her NEP.

The primary purpose of EPA's PE is to help the agency determine whether the 28 programs included in the NEP are making continuous progress implementing their Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plans (CCMPs). The evaluation process has enhanced EPA Headquarters and Regional knowledge of each individual NEP and promoted information sharing of innovative projects and approaches across all 28 NEPs. In addition, EPA uses the evaluation process to assess how the NEPs support Clean Water Act (CWA) core programs and to evaluate the extent and effectiveness of the NEPs' contributions to achievement of EPA's 2016 - 2020 Strategic Plan Goal 2: Protecting America's Waters, Objective 2.1, Protect Human Health and Objective 2.2, Protect and Restore Watersheds and Aquatic Ecosystems.

Based on the PE Team's findings, we believe your Program continues to make significant progress in implementing the CHNEP CCMP. We are pleased to announce that you have passed the 2020 PE and are eligible for funding authorized by CWA §320.

2020 Program Evaluation Findings

The following summary highlights the Team's key findings by identifying the CHNEP's: (I) Progress Made in the Areas Highlighted in the 2015 Program Evaluation, (II) Support of CWA

Core Programs, (III) Strengths, and (IV) Challenges. This summary is intended both to recognize the Program's successes and to recommend efforts to further strengthen the Program. The Program's response to these recommendations will be evaluated in the next PE cycle.

I. Progress Made in the Areas Highlighted in the 2015 Program Evaluation Review

Program Implementation and Reporting – Program Planning and Administration

Website Enhancements

In 2015, the PE Team recommended that CHNEP enhance its website and make it more user friendly. The CHNEP moved its website to a new host and redeveloped and expanded the site's contents. The new website is independent of the host entity and all staff members work to keep the content current and relevant to the CHNEP goals and priority actions. The new format is visually appealing and organized to make information easy to find. Website analytics show the website is continually increasing in unique visits.

Climate Change

In 2015, the PE Team recommended that CHNEP create a risk-based climate change vulnerability assessment and apply the findings to the CCMP so the CCMP goals can be achieved even as the climate changes. The CHNEP's Habitat Resiliency to Climate Change Report was completed in this PE cycle. The results were used in modifying and adding new CCMP objectives in the revised 2019 CCMP.

Staff used mapping tools to establish habitat resiliency and migration pathways in response to climate change. A GIS-based marsh habitat evolution model was developed to estimate the acreage changes of salt marsh, juncus marsh, freshwater marsh, mangrove, and salt barren habitats over time for future conditions. Inputs to the model include topography, vegetation and habitat data, tides, projected future sea-level rise, areas of freshwater influence, and habitat specific accretion rates. The model produces maps of habitat types and habitat acreage on decade intervals. This data is considered in the Habitat Restoration Needs Plan to develop a Habitat Evolution Model and to help identify restoration opportunities that could potentially accommodate habitat migration.

II. Support of CWA Core Programs

Water Quality Monitoring

The CHNEP has shown leadership by participating in four coastal water quality and seagrass monitoring and mapping programs. The CHNEP coordinates the Coastal Charlotte Harbor Monitoring Network (CCHMN), which is a partnership of agencies that provide monthly water quality data using a probabilistic sampling design, collecting water samples from 60 random sites throughout ten waterbodies each month.

In addition, the CHNEP maintains the CHNEP Water Atlas, launched in 2011, to disseminate all publicly available water quality data collected in the area. Users can access information on individual waterbodies, including lakes, ponds, bays, rivers, and streams, to view associated water quality data and thereby protect public health, aquatic life and the recreational uses of Florida's waters, which are critical part of the state's economy.

Recently, the CHNEP launched a Microplastic Research program in the CHNEP study area. The new program has engaged two local organizations to sample and analyze this emerging pollutant. The data collected is shared with other researchers and policy makers to support efforts to prevent plastics from entering the estuary and reaching the ocean.

The CHNEP anticipates that all these efforts will continue to be one of the CWA core support roles the Program will continue to play for its partners, as affirmed in the 2019 CHNEP CCMP.

III. Strengths

Program Planning and Administration

Revised CCMP

One of the most significant accomplishments during this review period was the development and completion of the newly revised CCMP. The 2019 revised CCMP was developed over a nearly two-year period through a series of public meetings and partners' collaboration. The previous CCMP had not been significantly modified since the inception of the CHNEP, so it was time for a major overhaul. The revised CCMP includes the modification of the CHNEP name and the expansion of its boundary to encompass the freshwater Caloosahatchee Basin. New partners and stakeholders have been engaged due to the expansion of the study area.

The CHNEP will continue to enact collaborative solutions that address the needs of the entire Program and fulfill its mission of uniting Central and Southwest Florida to protect water and wildlife. The PE Team encourages the CHNEP to continue to track and report to the public and stakeholders on activities that implement the CCMP, including in the expansion area to ensure lead entities are aware of the CCMP activities and funding opportunities available for them to undertake them. By inviting policymakers and community leaders from these new counties and cities to participate in the CHNEP Policy and Citizens Advisory Committees, collaborative relationships will be formed to help improve awareness and engagement amongst stakeholders.

Management Conference

The CHNEP has an extremely active Management Conference (MC) dedicated to facilitating and providing support for CCMP implementation. The MC has been reinvigorated with many new members, increasing the diversity and breadth of representation throughout the CHNEP area.

Many partners have noted that they are receiving more communications from the CHNEP staff on progress, which they greatly appreciate.

Staffing

The CHNEP completely reformed the staff team during the review period, with every position refilled over the course of this review period. Each of the new staff members brings technical expertise. Together, they have been able to develop new processes and resources that have enabled work to expand to reach new levels of productivity and performance. Additionally, the initiation of a Conservation Associate paid internship program has provided much-needed general program support while offering new professionals the opportunity to gain training and experience in the field.

Program Implementation and Reporting

Education and Outreach

The CHNEP continued its excellent education and outreach efforts during this reporting period by reaching nearly 3,300 new subscribers to its educational publications and acquiring over 23,000 web page visits since the 2017 update. The CHNEP has expanded its outreach initiatives with six Conservation Lands Workshops, two Watershed Summits, and many additional awareness events. The Program has distributed 171,000 copies of its *Harbor Happenings* magazine and 210,000 of its nature calendars with educational insert. Additionally, the CHNEP Facebook page was developed during this timeframe and is up to 1,379 followers and 1,235 total likes. Also, the Program has a very engaged Citizen Advisory Committee that reinforces and maintains public support.

Ecosystem Restoration and Protection

Habitat

Seagrasses

The CHNEP keeps working to improve conditions for seagrasses in the study area. Documenting seagrass acreage and how it changes over time is a valuable tool for scientists across the state of Florida. Seagrasses require relatively clean water to flourish and are sensitive to changes in water quality and clarity; thus they are an important indicator of Charlotte Harbor's health.

In 2016, seagrass mapping showed a nearly two percent increase in seagrass in Charlotte Harbor. Seagrass acreage in Charlotte Harbor had remained around 18,000 acres between 2000 and 2016. The 2016 estimates show a trend of significant gains toward the protection and recovery of seagrass in the system.

LeHigh Headwaters Initiative

The CHNEP continues to support the LeHigh Headwaters Initiative. This is an initiative to restore more natural flows in an approximately 100,000-acre area. Currently, the watershed restoration plan (with identified projects) has already been developed and is being implemented. These projects are designed to reduce flooding of downstream tributaries receiving excessive runoff, increase freshwater storage, improve water quality, and restore downstream flows to waters needing additional freshwater. One of these projects is Harns Marsh, a 578-acre former farm that is now a large created wetland that captures and treats stormwater, and also provides excellent habitat for recreation and birdwatching.

Living Resources

The CHNEP has been working with partners to restore shellfish population in the region. The Program has worked with The Nature Conservancy implementing portions of the *Oyster Habitat Restoration Plan*, including installing nine created oyster reefs along the shoreline of the Peace River. These reefs alone have cultivated 300,000 oysters, naturally filtering approximately 19 million gallons of water a day.

Water Quality

The CHNEP is partnering with the Charlotte County Utilities Department (CCUD), which is making water quality improvements in the Charlotte Harbor Estuary (CHE) through the following:

- researching how septic systems are contributing to nutrient and bacterial pollution in the CHE;
- developing a Sewer Master Plan, a 20-year road map to build sewer systems that support the health of the CHE;
- working on a long-term comprehensive approach for monitoring the changes in nutrient loading throughout the septic-to-centralized sewer conversion process; and
- measuring the velocity of nutrients traveling through groundwater to develop a blue-green algae outbreak forecast model.

The CHNEP is an active partner in this effort to reach shared water resource protection goals in making necessary infrastructure improvements.

IV. Challenges

Program Implementation and Reporting – Program Planning and Administration

Water Atlas Enhancements

EPA commends the CHNEP on the Water Atlas website; however, the PE Team believes that there is room for enhancements. In order to improve data used for reporting ecosystem status

and trends in the study area, EPA recommends that CHNEP continue expanding the Water Atlas website with additional water quality and ecological health metrics linked to the CHNEP's CCMP monitoring plan and more real-time data analysis.

Also, EPA recommends adding a link to the CHNEP's CCMP in the Water Atlas homepage so the users have a better understanding of CCMP goals, priorities, actions, and connections to the information reported in the Water Atlas. This will give greater visibility to the CHNEP, raising awareness about estuary issues and a return of the investment to the stakeholders.

Operational Efficiencies and Improvements

With continued funding uncertainties and rising programmatic cost, EPA challenges the CHNEP to seek ways to control overhead expenses and increase operational efficiencies. Additionally, the CHNEP should explore ways to improve its operational systems, for example developing better internal systems to more readily identify and reallocate unused resources. Delivering services in a cost effective and equitable manner is of utmost importance, given limited resources and an expanded service area and partnerships.

Thank you again for participating in the PE process. We welcome any additional thoughts you may have, either about the evaluation process itself or about EPA's involvement in the implementation of the CHNEP's CCMP. If you have any questions or comments, please contact me at (202) 748-7017 or Noemi Mercado at (202) 566-1251.

Sincerely,

Robert S. Benson

Robert S. Benson, Acting Chief,
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Office of Wetlands, Oceans and Watersheds
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

cc: John Goodin, U.S. EPA, Director, Office of Wetlands, Oceans and Watersheds
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