



## Management Committee Meeting Minutes

Friday – January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2026, 9:00 am – 1:00 pm

Charlotte County Centennial Park

Large Multipurpose Room

1120 Centennial Blvd., Port Charlotte, FL 33953

### **Members Present:**

Steve Rabney	U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)
<b>Melynda Brown</b>	Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP)
Vanessa Bauzo	Florida Department of Agriculture (FDACS)
Jamie Wolanin	Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)
Hannah Quenga	Central Florida Regional Planning Council (CFRPC)
Phil Flood	South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD)
Vivianna Bendixson	Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD)
James Guida	Peace River Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority (PRMRWSA)
Matt DePaolis	Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation (SCCF)
David Lindsay	Lehigh Acres Municipal Services Improvement District (LA-MSID)
Mollie Holland	Charlotte County
Paul Carlisle	Glades County
Debra Butler	Hardee County
Dawn Ritter	Highlands County
Phil Gillogly	Lee County
Aliisa Powers	Manatee County
Tabitha Biehl	Polk County
Paul Semenek	Sarasota County
Kyle Lasek	City of Bartow
Justin Mahon	City of Fort Myers
Stefan Kalev	City of North Port
Boyd Lawrence	City of Punta Gorda
Holly Milbrandt	City of Sanibel
Christina Rimes	City of Venice
Harry Phillips	City of Cape Coral/Citizen's Advisory Committee Co-Chair
Arielle Taylor-Manges	Technical Advisory 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 Natural Estuary Partnership (CHNEP)
Dail Laughinghouse, PhD	University of Florida
Lenny Landau, P.E.	Guest Speaker
David Fiess	Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP)
Barbara Kirkpatrick, PhD	Public

### **Agenda Item #1 – Call to Order and Introductions — Melynda Brown, Co-Chair**

Co-Chair Melynda Brown called the meeting to order at 9:04 AM.

**Agenda Item #2 Additions or Deletions — Melynda Brown , Co-Chair**

**PHIL FLOOD MOVED, SECONDED BY PAUL CARLISLE, TO APPROVE THE AGENDA AS PRESENTED. THE MOTION WAS CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY WITH NO FURTHER DISCUSSION.**

**Agenda Item #3 – Public Comment on Agenda Items — Melynda Brown, Co-Chair**

There was no public comment.

**Agenda Item #4 – Management Committee September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2025 Meeting Minutes — Melynda Brown, Co-Chair**

**PHIL FLOOD MOVED, SECONDED BY PAUL SEMENEC, TO APPROVE THE SEPTEMBER 5<sup>TH</sup>, 2025 MEETING MINUTES. THE MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY WITH NO FURTHER DISCUSSION.**

**Agenda Item #5 – Technical Advisory Committee Report — Arielle Taylor-Manges, TAC Co-Chair**

Arielle Taylor-Manges, the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) Co-Chair, provided a report from the December 4, 2025 meeting.

On December 4th, 2025, the TAC meeting chaired by Arielle Taylor-Manges featured presentations on the *Coastal Charlotte Harbor Monitoring Network's Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) and Quality Assurance Protection Plan (QAPP)*, conducted by Nicole Iadevaia, CHNEP's Director of Research & Restoration. This presentation discussed surface water quality assessments in Lemon Bay and Charlotte Harbor, with annual updates on SOP compliance and data reporting overseen by the FDEP. TAC members approved updates on monitoring strategies, emphasizing current data for Sanibel and transitions to metrics like chlorophyll-A and turbidity. CHNEP's Research and GIS Coordinator, Sarina Barnard, presented the *CHNEP Monitoring Strategy*, an EPA-required supplement detailing funding sources and strategies to enhance monitoring efforts, which included revisions from the 2025 CCMP. The committee made minor edits for consistency and clarified monitoring commitments to the Clean Water Act, ultimately securing unanimous TAC support for the updated strategy's approval by the Policy Committee.

The third presentation was given by Dr. Eric Milbrandt of the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation (SCCF) on the *Loss of Seagrass in Matlacha Pass and the Distribution and Abundance of Macroalgae*. This presentation outlined a project aimed at monitoring Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) in the Pine Island Sound and Caloosahatchee estuaries, highlighting the impact of macroalgae and nonpoint source pollution on seagrass decline. Initial findings reveal biodiversity variations linked to hydrological divides. The next presentation was from Dr. Rachel Rotz from Florida Gulf Coast University on *Understanding Nutrient Loading in a Hydrologically Sensitive Coastal Watershed: The Peace River Watershed*, which emphasized the necessity for collaboration with the FDEP to implement research findings addressing nutrient pollution, calling for improved data on wastewater systems. Lastly, Carter Oleckna from Charlotte County and the University of Florida presented on *Tracking Nutrient Dynamics and Habitat Change: The Role of Participatory Science in Florida's Seagrass Meadows*, which discussed the Eyes on Seagrass program, which involves community engagement to monitor algae dynamics and support conservation efforts. The presentations collectively underscored the importance of data collection and effective policy recommendations to tackle marine ecosystem challenges.

**Agenda Item #6 – Citizens Advisory Committee Report — Harry Phillips, CAC Co-Chair**

Harry Phillips, Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) Co-Chair, provided a report from the December 16, 2025 meeting that he chaired.

The CAC meeting on December 16, 2025, chaired by Harry Phillips, welcomed three new applicants: Ms. Ashley Cook for Charlotte County, who leads various environmental projects; Ms. Suzanne Lindsey for Polk County, involved in the Environmental Lands Program; and Mr. Steve Buczynski for Hendry County, President of the Audubon Society. Their applications will be reviewed by the Policy Committee on January

22nd. The committee also approved updates to the CHNEP Citizen Advisory Committee Bylaws to align with the 2025 CCMP revisions, correcting a numbering error in Article III identified from an earlier workshop.

The CAC reviewed updates made to the Communications and Outreach Strategy, critical for improving regional communication and outreach concerning environmental education, outlining strategies, partners, and potential funding sources. The document revisions included emphasis on enhancing environmental education projects and aligning with the 2025 CCMP's goals. Committee members discussed previous edits that enhanced clarity in the document and provided improved descriptions for community collaboration efforts. Members inquired about potential federal funding impacts, confirming that CHNEP's outreach activities remain unaffected, and that ongoing funding would support their efforts. CHNEP's strategies, particularly their Water Atlas, were commended for their structure, and the utility of CHNEP-developed fact sheets was highlighted for educating governing boards. An emphasis was placed on the effectiveness of CHNEP's nature calendar as an outreach tool, particularly beneficial for engaging families in libraries. The CAC reviewed language changes, standardizing terminology such as "fisherperson" throughout the documents. The CAC received a presentation on the "Resources" Guide, aimed at equipping members as environmental ambassadors, along with physical materials to support community outreach. Members were briefed on the educational resources, including access to past summits and transitioned materials. The CAC supported funding three out of four Conservation Grant Applications, aimed at local environmental improvement projects. Members discussed the mechanics of the grant invoice process, clarifying that grants are based on deliverables. A site visit occurred following the meeting at the Babcock-Webb habitat restoration project, highlighting ongoing collaboration between CHNEP, its members, and partners.

#### **Agenda Item #7 – CHNEP Update — Jennifer Hecker, CHNEP**

CHNEP's Executive Director, Jennifer Hecker, presented on programmatic activity occurring since the last Management Committee meeting.

For program administration, CHNEP planned and executed both the Technical Advisory Committee Meeting (8/7), Citizens Advisory Committee meeting (8/20), Management Committee meeting (9/5), and Policy Committee meeting (9/25) including lining up presenters, drafting agenda packet, updating Committee webpage, creating PowerPoints, drafting minutes, etc.; reviewed Draft Program Evaluation Letter, providing feedback responses as requested, and received Final Program Evaluation Letter indicating CHNEP is "proficient" and will continue to be eligible to receive federal funding; sent on-boarding materials to new Policy Committee member/co-chair, Craig Hesterlee, representing the EPA, Commissioner Petrina McCutchen representing the City of Fort Meade, new Management Committee members, Rebekah Harp representing the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council, County Manager Paul Carlisle representing Glades County. 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; 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, prepared and submitted FY25 annual End-of-Year reports for both EPA 320 and EPA IJA grants, as well as drafted and sent FY2025 Significant Accomplishments for each; FY26 EPA 320 and EPA IJA grants were applied for in June, with FY26 EPA 320 award just issued - still awaiting EPA IJA 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 were drafted and approved, providing annual programmatic support funds. CHNEP staff attended numerous partner and committee events. 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 28<sup>th</sup> 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; presented on the work of CHNEP and co-funded project at the Oct. 22<sup>nd</sup> City of Punta Gorda Council meeting; and CHNEP hosted the annual 2025 Southwest Florida Resiliency Summit on September 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> with 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 events, 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; 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. In social media and publications, CHNEP staff 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; refreshed and reposted CHNEP project factsheets with updated language, organizations, funding sources, and activities as outlined in the new 2025 CCMP; and was interviewed on a WGPU article on “Conferences: Safety in communities tomorrow relies on building resiliency today” and a US EPA online article on “Opportunities for Resilience of Southwest Florida’s Salt Marsh Ecosystem.” 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.

One member commented that a lot of other groups are doing work, such as HAB Working Group, and asked whether CHNEP is monitoring those. Ms. Hecker responded that CHNEP does its best to attend and monitor meetings to keep abreast of what others are doing, in order to know how to support or fill gaps.

### **Agenda Item #8 – CHNEP FY26 Call for Projects and Amended FY26 Master Work Plan — Jennifer Hecker, CHNEP**

CHNEP’s Executive Director, Jennifer Hecker, presented the on CHNEP’s FY26 Call for Projects and associated proposed work plan amendments for the Management Committee to form a recommendation to the Policy Committee on approval of the Amended Work Plan. Highlights are as follows:

CHNEP has received federal 320 funds for FY26 and carries over unspent funds from FY25. Consequently, it issued a Call for Projects to its members and county administrators. This move illustrates the commitment to utilizing available resources for community projects. In response to the Call for Projects, CHNEP received 19 proposals from six counties. It established evaluation criteria and conducted an extensive staff evaluation to prioritize these proposals based on factors like alignment with the Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP), logistical feasibility, and adherence to funding timelines. The total funding available from unbudgeted FY26 320 funds and FY25 carryover amounts to \$1,033,368. Additionally, delays in the Hendry County Vulnerability Assessment allowed for the allocation of previously budgeted funds to another project—Pollywog Creek Stabilization. A similar situation applies to Lee County, where funds for a delayed Vulnerability Assessment Enhancement project are now available to be redirected toward a related resiliency project focusing on stormwater drainage improvements. This demonstrates adaptive funding management in response to project delays. CHNEP will fund a variety of top-ranked projects across the six counties that submitted proposals. Noteworthy projects include SEASCAPES in Lee County and habitat restoration projects in Sarasota and Polk counties, ensuring that every participating county has funding for a new initiative this fiscal year. Integrating projects into the work plan signifies a

step forward, but it does not guarantee funding approval. It allows CHNEP staff to discuss logistics and project management, with the potential for redirecting funds to alternative projects if issues arise. Additional funding from FY26 IJA (Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act) is anticipated, which would augment the total available funding. This additional allocation of \$538,037 may help address further project proposals and enhance community resilience. Amendments proposed in this cycle include updates to financial tables, year-over-year budget adjustments, and funding reallocations reflecting actual costs. This accounting ensures transparency and accuracy in fiscal management.

One member pointed out the Pollywog and Lake Lulu projects have 25/20 listed in the packets and Ms. Hecker explained that would be typos from when scores were carried over into packet text and would not impact the overall scoring and prioritization of projects for potential funding. Another member asked if CHNEP had spoken to Hendry County about swapping the VA for the Pollywog Creek project because Hendry is starting work on its VA currently and it may be a timing issue and Ms. Hecker said that it is a timing issue, that CHNEP has been in conversations with them and the Pollywog Creek was proposed by Hendry County staff. Another member asked if there was any indication of when CHNEP will find out if it is getting its IJA funding and Ms. Hecker responded that there has been no indication to date. One member asked if the Lee County SEASCAPES project is a Cape Coral project and Ms. Hecker responded yes – that the project names reflect counties they are in to ensure equitable distribution of funding.

**PHIL FLOOD MOVED, SECONDED BY PAUL SEMENEC, TO RECOMMEND MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE APPROVAL OF THE AMENDED FY26 MASTER WORK PLAN. THE MOTION WAS CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY WITH NO FURTHER DISCUSSION.**

**Agenda Item #9 – CHNEP Finance Strategy Updates — Jennifer Hecker, CHNEP**

CHNEP’s Executive Director, Jennifer Hecker, presented updates to CHNEP’s Finance Strategy for Management Committee to form a recommendation for Policy Committee approval. Highlights are as follows:

The upcoming 2025 CCMP update, approved by the Policy Committee and backed by an EPA letter on December 17, represents updates to CHNEP approach to conservation management. Appendices containing Monitoring, Finance, and Communications & Outreach strategies accompany this update. The EPA’s approval also emphasizes the need for CHNEP to assess its associated documents for necessary updates. In response to the EPA’s recommendations, CHNEP reviewed various components, culminating in the presentation of updated Monitoring Strategy to the TAC on December 4, the Communications & Outreach Strategy to the CAC on December 16, and an upcoming discussion regarding the Finance Strategy within the Management Committee. CHNEP has a proactive approach to approve and finalize essential strategies ahead of the impending Policy Committee meeting. The final strategies will be presented at the CHNEP Policy Committee meeting scheduled for January 22, 2026, for formal approval. Upon ratification, the newly updated strategy documents will replace earlier versions on the CCMP webpage, ensuring accessibility of the most current information to stakeholders and the public. Significant updates in the CCMP include the revision of the document’s date to 2025, realignment of CHNEP’s address, and updates on funding levels and federal matching contributions. Furthermore, a comprehensive review of the annual funding support table and CHNEP administration costs has been undertaken to enhance clarity. The document has seen adjustments, including the removal of an annual CCMP Projects and Activities section, reflecting the adaptable nature of project planning in response to yearly work plans. The structure now emphasizes comprehensive funding across all CCMP actions rather than fragmented activity listing, ensuring a streamlined approach. Critical changes include the inclusion of updated language detailing the complexities and costs linked with multi-partner and multi-phase projects, reaffirming CHNEP’s commitment to transparency regarding funding necessity and allocation. The revision process also entailed the removal and modification of language pertaining to funding priorities and agreements with local governments, focusing instead on simplifying procedures and enhancing communication through annual fact sheets and requests for government presentations. Adjustments regarding private sector solicitation approaches reflect a shift from general fundraising to targeted sponsorship initiatives, along with the reallocation of efforts towards

supporting partner volunteer opportunities and adapting to the anticipated lack of funding for conservation grants.

One member commented in regard to removal of long-term/short-term funding, that he would still like to have some sort of a strategic outline of the long-term funding rather than relying on the annual work plan. Ms. Hecker responded that she believes that the strategy does lay out long-term strategies but the duration of whether annual or multi-year funding is needed varies by project. CHNEP is always looking for funding opportunities, however, we do not want to put too many specifics into a five year document given level of current funding uncertainty. Another member mentioned that short- and long-term goals are mentioned in the introduction and that would have to be adjusted as well to which Ms. Hecker agreed. Another member said that it is great that for city/county funding it specifies in multi-year funding agreements because that gives a security level of at least the 3–5-year window of what the expectations are – inquiring is that can be added to state and regional funding section as well, to which Ms. Hecker agreed. She also mentioned that just looking at the experience with SWFWMD, that is a significant drop in just one year that makes it very hard on CHNEP with regards to funding operations and other Partnership activities. Ms. Hecker said that CHNEP has recently secured a 5-year agreement with the District, though at the lower funding level. Another member from SWFWMD added that what looks like a reduction in funding from SWFWMD is not actually a reduction of investment in that area as the monitoring it was supporting continues. Ms. Hecker added that CHNEP has been getting funding from FDEP and SWFWMD since CHNEP began, as programmatic funding not tied to specific projects until in latter years in SWFWMD agreements when CHNEP decided approximately a decade ago to use some of those programmatic funds for the CCHMN water quality monitoring project to fill a sampling gap at the time. She noted that Sarasota Bay Estuary Program and Tampa Bay Estuary Program’s SWFWMD funding is not tied to specific projects, is significantly more than CHNEP though CHNEP serves a larger service areas with more waterbodies. CHNEP staff did their best to communicate and advocate for that but ultimately the decision was made to lower CHNEP’s programmatic funding (from \$130,000 to \$56,000) in a 5-year funding agreement.

**PAUL CARLISLE MOVED, SECONDED BY BOYD LAWRENCE, TO RECOMMEND MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE APPROVAL OF CHNEP’S UPDATED FINANCE STRATEGY WITH THE RECOMMENDED EDITS INCORPORATED. THE MOTION WAS CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY WITH NO FURTHER DISCUSSION.**

**Agenda Item #10 – Blue Green Mitigation Strategies and Technologies — Dail Laughinghouse, PhD, University of Florida**

Dr. Dail Laughinghouse, from the University of Florida, shared some of the latest research findings regarding cyanobacteria mitigation techniques including what has been found to work, not work, and some technologies that are promising. Highlights are as follows:

Cyanobacteria, or blue-green algae, can rapidly bloom in Florida’s freshwater and marine systems, sometimes producing toxins that cause harmful algal blooms (HABs). Central and Southwest Florida have experienced recurring blooms, prompting Governor DeSantis to create a Blue Green Algae Task Force, which met from 2019 to 2024 and issued consensus recommendations. The task force concluded that excess nutrients—primarily nitrogen and phosphorus from agriculture, wastewater, septic systems, stormwater runoff, and legacy sources—are the main drivers of blooms, with impacts intensified by land-use changes, altered hydrology, and climate change. While most recommendations focus on reducing nutrient inputs, the task force also highlighted the need to invest in a diverse set of cost-effective, environmentally safe, and scalable technologies to mitigate existing blooms. In line with this, the CHNEP Policy Committee added a 2025 CCMP action to reduce HABs by supporting early detection and effective mitigation methods. Dr. Laughinghouse reviewed recent research on cyanobacteria mitigation, discussing what works, what does not, and which emerging technologies show promise but require further study. Some overall conclusions were that many proactive and reactive management techniques available but that there is no ‘silver bullet’ for all HABs and all waters. Control methods may work in some waters and not others and may be a question of scale or economics as well as other variables. Not all waters are the same and thus, not all cyanobacteria (algae) are the same. The efficacy of treatment methods differs due to target species, water

temperature, water chemistry, formulation of compounds, etc. There were no comments or questions given time constraints, with members encouraged to reach out to the presenter directly.

### **Agenda Item #11 – Red Tide and Lake Okeechobee Management — Lenny Landau, P.E.**

Lenny Landau, P.E. was a guest speaker that shared 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* is a microscopic dinoflagellate algae that commonly causes red tide harmful algae blooms on the Gulf Coast of Florida. These algae can produce brevetoxins, which often harm marine life, kill fish and release airborne aerosols that irritate human respiratory systems. The red tide event that lasted from October 2017 to January 2019 had a huge economic toll on the region, with an economic study putting the losses at \$2.7 billion total. CHNEP members have added Water Quality 5.2 to “Reduce Harmful Algal Blooms – Support development of methods for early identification of HABs, as well as best practices and technologies to reduce or mitigate their harmful environmental, social, and economic impacts” to the 2025 CHNEP CCMP. Lake Okeechobee discharges/releases to the Caloosahatchee River are governed by *the Lake Okeechobee Service Operating Manual (LOSOM)*. LOSOM was designed to introduce a flexible system-wide approach to manage Lake Okeechobee to address a long list of concerns and requirements including red tide. LOSOM gives stakeholders an enhanced voice in decision-making and is a central tenet of the new approach is to significantly reduce harmful discharges (blue green algae, nutrients, & general water quality) to the northern estuaries while increasing flows south to the Everglades. A feature of LOSOM is “Recovery Operations” to lower the lake level before the next wet season, to minimize the peak lake level, and to promote the recovery of the lake’s ecology by allowing light to penetrate to the bottom and enable growth of submerged aquatic vegetation. A recent published scientific journal article co-authored by the Mr. Landau, CHNEP staff, and others demonstrated that the loading (pollutant concentration and volume of water) from the Caloosahatchee into the Gulf is the highest of area rivers and has been found to have contributed to longer, more severe red tide events. It underscored how increased Nitrogen contributes to Red Tide and how inversely, decreased Nitrogen reduces red tide.

One member asked if there was any evaluation of the banking practices USACE did after Hurricane Ian which was prior to LOSOM and Mr. Landau responded only to the extent that he monitored all of the data, looked at when there was red tide and when there wasn’t, and what the flows were. Another member said that regarding the USACE, they did change the schedule a lot after the dike was completed. There were many issues with the dike with them being unable to store as much water as they would have liked to. After the dike was completed, they started changing their schedule – that was prior to LOSOM. Mr. Landau said that even though the dike is stronger, keeping the level down has a big effect on the head and how much flow they are going to have when they open it. Ms. Hecker said that the premise of hydrological restoration in trying to get towards more natural water management can improve water quality through reduced nutrient loading. That load reduction can in turn can help with harmful algae blooms; therefore, as we make improvements in water management, we can hopefully see such benefits. Mr. Landau said that the pollution that comes into the Caloosahatchee River makes it worse. One member said his county is on the lake and they have concerns about lake ecology, which needs to be considered as well. Ms. Hecker agreed and mentioned that the Lake Okeechobee Tracker on CHNEP’s Water Atlas is an invaluable tool to see how lake and river water levels and how those compare to their respective ecological envelope of appropriate water levels needed in both to maintain their respective ecological health. Dr. Kirkpatrick than commented as a member of Red Tide Task Force that one of its charges is to look at where there are gaps in knowledge and see if they can secure funding for those gaps. She added that they held an intense workshop last spring to try to identify what those gaps are in their knowledge, and assuming they get the same amount of funding from the state this year, they will put out an RFP specifically to address those gaps in knowledge.

### **Agenda Item #12 – CHNEP Technical Projects Updates — Nicole Iadevaia, CHNEP**

Nicole Iadevaia, CHNEP’s Director of Research and Restoration, provided the committee with a brief overview on project progress since the previous Management Committee meeting. Highlights are as follows:

For the CHNEP Water Atlas, a comprehensive analysis of water quality trends for 17 parameters has been completed for 2025. The Suncoast Waterkeeper's enterococci data has been incorporated into the Coastal Conditions Map. Waterbody pages now feature a 5-year chart design that displays the 6-month moving average, annual mean, and established thresholds for each parameter. As for the CCHMN, the Q4 data collection was collected and submitted to close out FY25. Q1 data collection for FY26 has been completed and Q2 is underway. Annual audits were conducted, and the annual meeting took place in August to review the program's progress. 2025 Updates to Project Standard Operating Procedures were reviewed and adopted at the December 4 CHNEP TAC meeting as Technical Report 25-01. A fact sheet and infographics was created 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, Charlotte County is collaborating to finalize a baseline Vulnerability Assessment (VA) by mapping critical assets and standardizing metadata according to FDEP requirements. They have modeled flood exposure and conducted risk analyses for these assets across various flood scenarios. County departments are currently reviewing this flood exposure data. The next steps include identifying key areas for adaptation planning and presenting the final report and recommendations at the upcoming Public Meeting #2 and to the Charlotte Board of County Commissioners for approval, followed by submitting the final data and report to FDEP. For the Polk County Vulnerability Assessment, the Central Florida Regional Planning Council (CFRPC) and Polk County are collaborating to model various rainfall flood scenarios using the HEC-RAS model, which includes assessments for 200-year, 500-year, and compounded flooding events. This effort led to the development of additional chapters and recommendations specifically for Polk County, aimed at identifying priority areas for flood risk. Visual representations of the flooding events were created for community outreach and shared with the Polk Stormwater Advisory Committee (STAC). The next steps involve presenting the final report and recommendations to the Polk BCC for approval and submitting the completed data and report to the FDEP. For Highlands, Hardee, and DeSoto County Vulnerability Assessments, CFRPC and local counties are collaborating to identify Adaptation Action Areas (AAAs) based on completed baseline vulnerability assessments. They are drafting plans that include engineering designs and cost estimates for the top three AAAs in each county. A methodology for prioritizing critical assets has been established and approved, with flood exposure analyses for a 100-year rainfall event completed; results for 200- and 500-year events are expected in January. The next phase involves creating appendix reports for each county's Vulnerability Assessment, detailing the top three AAAs along with associated projects, designs, and costs.

CHNEP has continued to update its seagrass maps and charts, which are accessible on the CHNEP Water Atlas website. Additionally, new fact sheets are available on the CHNEP website, covering topics like basin water quality, seagrass health, and funding opportunities for research and restoration projects.

### **Agenda Item #13 - Management Committee Member Updates — Melynda Brown, Co-Chair**

Stefan Kalev (North Port): North Port was thrilled about CHNEP's Call for Projects and is grateful for the opportunity. The City is starting its tree donation program as part of a city-wide effort to replenish the tree canopy within the City. Each quarter, the City will be donating a certain number of trees to private residents. With the first donation happening soon, North Port residents are invited to receive a free Florida-native tree.

Paul Semenec (Sarasota County): The Alligator Creek Stream Restoration Project is getting close to the construction phase. We have received and made comments on the 100% design plans. The consultant should be addressing the comments, bid documents and the specifications next week. We have received the SWFWMD permit, and we anticipate the USACE permit this month. The construction will cost close to \$21 million. Advertising for the construction is anticipated to begin in February, with the hopes of awarding the contract this summer. We anticipate a 2-year construction timeline.

Paul Carlisle (Glades County): We have two septic-to-sewer conversion projects along the Caloosahatchee River. We are finalizing our contract with DEP to increase our capacity within our reservoir and wastewater treatment plants. At the Spring Lake Water Treatment Plant where the water that comes out is technically

potable, we are talking to the designer about taking measures to possibly reduce the nitrogen below a half percent.

Tabitha Biehl (Polk County): We have wrapped up the pilot stage of Bear Creek at the headwaters of the Peace River. It involved doing some injections to the creek system. We have the Upper Saddle Creek Project and some methods that target algae to harvest the nutrients coming out. We will be using a 3-prong approach – forecasting, detecting and mitigation to examine the 10 lakes and the natural process of blooms and nutrients in the Central Florida waters. We have a multispectral beam drome which we will attach to our helicopter, and we have also acquired WasteShark which is capable of harvesting vegetation and debris. We will be placing continuous water quality sensors on it and utilize that. We are testing light treatments on the algae blooms, and we are looking at different ways to harvest and examine biochar from our citrus groves that are transitioning into different uses. Currently, we are looking at bags, floating islands, etc., and we are working on the QAPP for that. In the Peace Creek Canal System, we are looking for funding to do more acquisitions within the Peace Creek Canal. We have been working on creating a better management system in the Peace Creek Canal. The (U.S.) Department of Commerce and CDBG-DR (Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery) awarded funds to Lake Gibson and Lake Bonny to address flooding issues all the way down to Lake Hancock.

Vivianna Bendixson (SWFWMD): The Upper Peace River MFL is going to peer review beginning next week. There is a website dedicated to it with information which will be followed up with dates regarding the public workshops following the peer reviews. There is also a priority MFL list on the website. The Cape Haze Restoration Project should be advertised next Friday. It is a collaboration of the NOAA Grant that we are working with. The SWIM priority waterbody list was approved by our governing board and there were no changes. We are mapping seagrass right now and the first run is almost completed. The last mapping cycle did not capture the 2024 hurricane season, so we are eager to see the results.

Melynda Brown (FDEP): We have a new statewide Aquatic Preserve website with resources and activities that staff have been involved in. We are working on keeping it up to date and it includes maps and management plans. It took a long time to develop. In celebration of the Florida Aquatic Preserve Act's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, we did some stewardship events. We had some marine debris cleanup along our shorelines in Estero Bay and Charlotte Harbor. We also coordinated with FWC law enforcement to clean up debris on the critical wildlife areas rookery islands.

Mollie Holland (Charlotte County): We are now 3 for 3 with our grant requests. We have a lot of internal projects happening. The One Charlotte One Water plan is edging forward for approval and will be a springboard for many new projects.

Boyd Lawrence (Punta Gorda): We are moving forward with the Tiki Point Living Shoreline project. Also, Kimley Horn has been contracted with for a stormwater master plan for the City.

Holly Milbrandt (Sanibel): We have completed and presented our draft vulnerability assessment to the council. The consultant did a nice job creating a story map of the VA and you can find it on the City's website. We have a new chief resilience officer. We have finished our last significant beach renourishment effort – from Captiva to Sanibel, to Bowman's which was one of our historically critically eroded areas. After all the sand, there will be about 150,000 plants will go in next to help stabilize that sand. Dr. Kirkpatrick, who has coordinated with the Roskamp Institute in Sarasota, will be studying the neurological effects of red tide on human brain. They are looking for volunteers to help evaluate those impacts and what makes people more susceptible or vulnerable to red tide impacts.

Matt DePaolis (SCCF): Our red tide study is happening. We have merged with the International Osprey Foundation. We took that under our umbrella so that we will be doing more wildlife monitoring around Sanibel. Our RECON mapper array is almost fully back up online, and our wave buoy should be re-installed this year.

Harry Phillips (Cape Coral): The City purchased an abandoned golf course years ago. We have been gathering public input on what to do with that space. We are looking for it to be a passive park with a stormwater component. Right now, we have an exotic invasive removal contractor working on it. We have

purchased a harvester, and we have been using a contractor to harvest mostly Spatterdock in our canals. With our own harvester, we can the transition with contractors in between fiscal years. Instead of herbicide, the nutrient removal aspect of harvesting is up and coming.

Jamie Wolanin (FWC): The submission deadline for project funding through FWC Aquatic Habitat Conservation and Restoration section just passed. The next couple of months will be used to rank projects. Hopefully the projects that I submitted for consideration in the southwest region get funded. The FWC May Commission meeting is going to be in Fort Myers. The agenda is TBD. The FWC Division of Marine Fisheries Management just hosted several statewide workshops regarding changes to sea trout management, They were successful and great input was gathered. The final meeting for updates to sea trout management will be in February.

Vanessa Bauzo (FDACS): On December 16, Commissioner Wilton Simpson released that he has approved 9 regional projects for our new regional projects program. You can find more information on these projects and what will be done on our website. There are 4 in the Lake Okeechobee area with the rest being in the middle and lower Suwannee River basin BMAP.

Justin Mahon (Fort Myers): The City is nearing completion of first deep injection well at the central wastewater plant. When that is online, it will effectively mean that we can stop surface water discharge to the Caloosahatchee River from that facility. Everything from the other plant is already being routed to Cape Coral for use in reclaim. That project will benefit the river and ecosystem.

Steve Rabney (USACE): Our permitting has moved entirely to the regulatory request system online. Additionally, the 2026 nationwide permits should be released soon and will be good for 5 years after that.

**Agenda Item #14 - Public Comment — Melynda Brown, Co-Chair**

One member commented that the FDEP South District Office in Fort Myers is hosting an open house on February 19<sup>th</sup> from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm and all are welcome.

**Agenda Item #15 - Future Meeting Date and Topics — Melynda Brown, Co-Chair**

The upcoming Management Committee meetings are May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2026, and September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2026. Members were asked to block the date on their calendars and plan to attend in person.

**Agenda Item #16 - Adjourn — Melynda Brown, Co-Chair**

Meeting was adjourned at 12:43 PM.