



CHNEP Management Committee Meeting Minutes
Friday, May 8th, 2026, 9:00 am – 1:00 pm
Large Multi-Purpose Room – Centennial Park
1120 Centennial Boulevard, Port Charlotte, FL 33953

Draft Management Committee Meeting Minutes
May 8, 2026

Members Present:

Melynda Brown	Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP)
Kali Spurgin (alt)	Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)
Phil Flood	South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD)
Vivianna Bendixson	Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD)
Matt DePaolis	Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation (SCCF)
Lisa Waskiewicz (alt.)	Lehigh Acres Municipal Services Improvement District (LA-MSID)
Brandon Moody	Charlotte County
Paul Carlisle	Glades County
Debra Butler	Hardee County
Roland Ottolini	Lee County
Tabitha Biehl	Polk County
Paul Semenec	Sarasota County
Justin Mahon	City of Fort Myers
Stefan Kalev	City of North Port
Hank Flores (alt.)	City of Punta Gorda
Holly Milbrandt	City of Sanibel

Members Present via Teams:

Felicia Burks	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 4
Kassidy King (alt.)	City of Winter Haven
Vanessa Bauzo	Florida Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services (FDACS)
Sheila McNamara	Central Florida Regional Planning Council (CFRPC)
Christina Rimes	City of Venice

Others Present:

Jennifer Hecker	Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP)
Michelle McGill	Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP)
Sarina Barnard	Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP)
Aaron Zimmermann	(CHNEP CAC Co-Chair)
Mark Walton	(CHNEP TAC Co-Chair)
Kelly Flowers Hass	Jones Edmunds
Kristine Morris	Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP)
David Fiess	Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP)
Allison Lewis	Jacobs Engineering
Abby Neufarth	Jacobs Engineering
Derek Spoerl	City of Fort Myers



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

Co-Chair Melynda Brown called the meeting to order at 9:06 am. Introductions were then made.

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

No additions or deletions were made to the agenda.

KALI SPURGIN MOVED, SECONDED BY MATT DEPAOLIS, TO APPROVE THE AGENDA AS PRESENTED. THE MOTION WAS CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY WITH NO FURTHER DISCUSSION.

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

No public comments on agenda items were made.

Agenda Item #4 – Management Committee January 9th, 2026 Meeting Minutes — Melynda Brown, Co-Chair

No edits were made to the Management Committee January 9th, 2026 Meeting Minutes.

PHIL FLOOD MOVED, SECONDED BY STEFAN KALEV, TO APPROVE THE MINUTES AS PRESENTED. THE MOTION WAS CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY WITH NO FURTHER DISCUSSION.

Agenda Item #5 – Management Committee Co-Chair Election – Melynda Brown, Co-Chair

Management Committee bylaws stipulate that Co-Chairs are elected annually on an alternating basis during each Spring meeting for 2-year terms. Nominations were sought in advance of the meeting with the direction that members could suggest other members for the position or self-nominate. There was also the opportunity to offer additional nominees at the meeting. One nomination was received, Melynda Brown representing the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), to serve a second term. They accepted the nomination.

PHIL FLOOD MOVED, SECONDED BY MATT DEPAOLIS TO APPROVE THE NOMINATION FOR A VOTE. THE MOTION WAS UNANIMOUSLY APPROVED AND SUBSEQUENTLY, MELYNDA BROWN WAS ELECTED UNANIMOUSLY WITH NO FURTHER DISCUSSION.

Agenda Item #6 – TAC Report – Mark Walton, TAC Co-Chair

Mark Walton, the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) Co-Chair, provided a report from the April 9, 2026 meeting.

The TAC meeting, held on April 9, 2026, was chaired by Mark Walton. TAC Co-Chair elections were held, and the committee voted unanimously for Stefan Kalev from the City of North Port to serve as the new Co-Chair. The meeting agenda then included presentations and discussions on the following topics:

- Betty Staugler, the NOAA HAB liaison from Florida Sea Grant, presented on Nutrients & Red Tide State of the Science Symposium Highlights. The April 2025 State of the Science symposium brought together experts from academia, government, and regional organizations to critically assess current knowledge on nutrient dynamics and their role in Florida red tide events. Designed as a technical working session rather than a public conference, it focused on in-depth analysis through presentations, discussions, and breakout groups. Participants reviewed existing research, identified knowledge gaps, and examined how physical, chemical, and ecological processes interact across all stages of harmful algal blooms. They also explored ways to better integrate data, models, and interdisciplinary approaches to improve monitoring,



prediction, and management. The findings were compiled into a white paper outlining key insights, research priorities, and recommendations to guide strategic planning and decision making for Florida's HAB Task Force and related efforts. Members asked about coordination between federal and state HAB task forces, applying findings locally (such as with the Charlotte Harbor Algae working group and local governments), studying deep well injection inputs, and whether red tide prediction models are ready for emergency use. Ms. Staugler responded that coordination and outreach exist but are informal or ongoing, the predictive models need more data and refinement for use in emergency planning, and USGS would be the best source for injection/aquifer questions.

- Dr. Richard Whitman, the Chief Science Officer for Heal Our Harbor, presented on the Integrated Microbial Source Tracking and Hydrometeorologic Controls on Fecal Indicator Bacteria in Upper Charlotte Harbor Canal Systems. This study describes a volunteer-driven water quality monitoring program in canal openings connected to Charlotte Harbor, Florida. Led by Heal Our Harbor, in collaboration with government agencies, universities, and community groups, the project combined field sampling with historical environmental data. Researchers tested water and sediment using multiple methods, including standard bacteria indicators, genetic source tracking, and DNA-based microbial community analysis. They also examined how pollution levels relate to environmental conditions such as rainfall, tides, salinity, nutrient concentrations, and water color. The results showed that fecal bacteria levels were strongly influenced by tidal flow and stormwater runoff, and they increased alongside higher nutrients and heavier seasonal rainfall. Contamination was most pronounced and predictable during the wet season, with water color and salinity serving as strong predictors. The study concludes that combining advanced microbial techniques with community volunteer monitoring is an effective approach for understanding and managing fecal pollution in coastal estuaries like those in subtropical Florida. Discussion focused on bird bacteria sources and implications for beach closures, the TMDL and BMAP process for taking natural background loads into account, along with the impact of rainfall on both bacteria levels and oyster populations.
- Sarina Barnard, CHNEP's Research and GIS Coordinator, presented on the CHNEP Water Atlas New Features and Tools. The CHNEP Water Atlas is an online resource that provides accessible environmental information about waterways in Central and Southwest Florida for both experts and the general public. It offers data on water quality, hydrology, and habitat conditions across rivers, lakes, estuaries, and coastal areas, presented through interactive maps, graphs, and charts that help users understand trends and relationships. The platform emphasizes usability and education by making complex data easy to interpret and keeping information frequently updated, including real-time conditions like water levels and quality changes. Recent improvements include several new map layers, updated design and content of volunteer pages, update Lake Okeechobee & Caloosahatchee Estuary Tracker that reflects the new LOSOM lake management bands and ecological envelope as well as distinguishes Lake O discharge at S-77 from the combined basin discharge at S-79, new parameters including Enterococcus and True Color on Water Quality Contour Maps, upgraded charts on waterbody pages, new map-based stream levels & flows tool with interactive charts displaying real-time level and flow data on river pages, and expanded Basin pages that include a plethora of data and information. A member asked whether new features and tools are shared across the other Water Atlases, and it was explained that each Atlas is independently funded and managed, with USF serving as the common contractor. If one Atlas (like CHNEP) funds new features, those improvements are often shared with other atlases, but sometimes they must pay to adopt or implement them in their own site. Overall, the goal is consistency across Atlases, but each ultimately operates independently and decides what to adopt.



The TAC heard the CHNEP Program and Technical Projects Updates presentation and shared updates with each other on their respective counties and communities regarding natural resource related activities and projects. There were no recommendations formed by the TAC pertaining directly to Management Committee agenda action items this cycle. These TAC presentations are on the CHNEP.org TAC webpage and CHNEP YouTube Channel and the members had no further comments on this report.

Agenda Item #7 – CAC Report – Aaron Zimmermann, CAC Co-Chair

Aaron Zimmermann, the Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) Co-Chair, provided a report from the April 22, 2026 meeting:

The CAC meeting held on April 22nd, 2026 was chaired by Aaron Zimmermann, who was nominated and re-elected to serve a second term as Co-Chair by a unanimous vote. Members welcomed one new CAC Applicant to represent DeSoto County, Ms. Courtney Darling. She works as a Landowner Assistance Coordinator for the Florida Conservation Group, an organization that is dedicated to protecting working agricultural lands primarily through conservation easements with programs such as FDACS Rural and Family Lands Protection Program and Florida Forever. Her application will be brought to the upcoming Policy Committee meeting (5/28/26) for approval.

- CHNEP Conservation Specialist Michelle McGill then presented on four Conservation Grant Applications received this funding ‘cycle’ for FY26. She gave the CAC a background and budget on each application and presented CHNEP staff recommendations for each application based off of a scoring matrix:
 - The first Conservation Grant application was from South Venice Beach Endowment Trust for the “South Venice Beach Vegetation Restoration,” requesting \$9,999 to engage volunteers to plant mangroves and other native vegetation along with dune fencing to restore native habitat and reduce the threat of a total breach of the area. CHNEP staff recommendation was not to fund the project as it is on private property and not under a conservation easement.
 - The second Conservation Grant application was from Future Forestry for the “21st Avenue Cul-de-Sac to Canal Restoration,” requesting \$8,400 to engage volunteers to remove exotic plants from a ½ acre parcel and install native plants to improve fish and wildlife habitat along the shoreline of a canal. CHNEP staff recommendation was to partially fund the project with the added terms of them providing volunteer attendance and hours; metric of total exotics removed and treated; number and species of plants planted; and before and after fixed point photos.
 - The third Conservation Grant titled “Brazilian Pepper Removal Project” from the Neighborhood Land Conservancy (formerly the Environmental Conservancy of North Port), requested \$3,943 to hire a contractor to remove Brazilian pepper from the front perimeter of multiple conserved properties. CHNEP staff recommendation was not to fund the project because the parcels are not currently under conservation easements.
 - The fourth Conservation Grant application was for the “Community-Based Water Quality Monitoring: Bacteria Testing and Field Sampling”, by Calusa Waterkeeper, requesting \$9,750 to deploy trained volunteers using standardized sampling kits and conduct monthly bacteria analyses, addressing critical data gaps in freshwater and tidal systems. The CHNEP staff recommendation was to fully fund this project with the added terms of them provide a summary of fecal indicator bacteria results and findings; number of volunteers and volunteer hours; photographs of sampling activities; and timeline and locations of sampling.



CAC members agreed with CHNEP staff Conservation Grant recommendations.

- Next, the Conservancy of Southwest Florida's Senior Environmental Policy Advisor, Amber Crooks, presented New Data Supporting Panther Conservation and Connectivity. The presentation focused on coordinated efforts to protect Florida panthers by improving habitat connectivity and integrating conservation into transportation and land-use planning. It highlighted work by the Florida Panther Recovery Implementation Team to ensure safe wildlife movement in a rapidly developing region. The CHNEP area is key to linking current panther habitats south of the Caloosahatchee River with potential habitats to the north. The discussion included using wildlife crossings, such as overpasses and underpasses, as well as technological tools such as a new Panther Dashboard that provides up-to-date data on panther populations, movements, mortality, and conservation efforts. Members emphasized the importance of collaboration in conservation planning, noting that wildlife crossings are effective and expressed their strong support for FDOT's leadership and the I-4 wildlife overpass. However, motion activated lights alerting drivers have had issues of being triggered by non-wildlife movement. Members raised concerns about outdated Florida panther population data and uncertainty around their long-term viability with continued habitat loss.
- The CAC then heard a presentation given by Earth Tech Environmental's Church Roberts on Identifying Roadkill Hotspots and Reducing Roadkill Numbers at the Local Level. This presentation highlighted that human road networks significantly harm wildlife by fragmenting habitats, disrupting movement, and causing frequent collisions with vehicles. To reduce these impacts, wildlife crossings combined with fencing have helped maintain habitat connectivity. Additionally, community-based efforts—such as a citizen-science programs to collect roadkill data to identify danger zones and guide interventions like signage, speed limits, and new crossings. Members discussed the increasing frequency of wildlife-vehicle collisions in areas of new or ongoing development — followed by wildlife displacement, road mortality, and human wildlife conflicts. One member shared results from a six-month roadkill survey which identified collision hotspots, especially near conservation areas. Once presented to local officials, wildlife crossing signs were installed. There was interest in using roadkill tracking apps to improve data collection to understand where added mitigation measures are needed.
- The Committee then engaged in a Living with Wildlife CAC Discussion focused on improving public education and engagement to reduce human-wildlife conflict and support safer coexistence between people and wildlife. Members shared real-world challenges such as habitat loss from development, public misunderstandings about wildlife, and inconsistent access to prevention tools. A major theme was that many residents, especially new residents to Florida, lack basic knowledge about local wildlife and how to interact safely with it. To address this, the group emphasized the need for clear, consistent, and multi-channel education, including printed materials, digital tools, in-person outreach, and QR-code-linked resources. Members strongly supported creating a centralized hub that would provide guidance on wildlife encounters, reporting systems, and access to wildlife services. Overall, the Committee expressed an interest in developing a rack card with information that would take people to a webpage where they could get these resources and ideas. In response, CHNEP staff will be developing some prototypes and mock-up to bring back to the Committee for further discussion in developing this joint educational campaign.

Finally, the CAC heard the CHNEP Program and Technical Projects update presentation and CAC members shared updates on their respective counties and communities and natural resource related activities and projects. There were no recommendations formed by the CAC pertaining directly to Management Committee agenda action items this cycle.



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A Management Committee member commented that the discussion about interacting with wildlife is very prudent with all of the development going on in this area and asked if the committee discussed incorporating or cross-referencing other resources that are available, for example from FWC or other organizations that already have those materials created. Mr. Zimmermann said the members discussed exploring and sharing what resources they already knew about for that exact reason, so as to not reinvent the wheel, and they discussed pulling existing resources into one hub or finding ways to streamline information or get people to those pages more effectively.

Another committee member asked if CHNEP requires volunteer water quality data results to be QA/QC and provide a chain-of-custody form before being put on the CHNEP Water Atlas. Ms. Hecker responded that CHNEP does not handle volunteer citizen science data on the CHNEP Water Atlas the same way as QA/QC data from the State WIN database. She explained that the volunteer data goes into the Atlas with that designation and it's not pulled into any of the analytical tools on the Atlas which only use WIN data. The committee member said that they believe there would be value to have some QA/QC of that data, because ultimately this is the type of information that gets into the communities because those volunteer organizations communicate with the press - not to say that the data is wrong but just to make sure that it's accurate. Ms. Hecker responded that the CHNEP conservation grants are a vehicle to encourage citizen engagement and community organizations to conduct work that furthers goals of the CCMP, but often those organizations don't have the capacity or funding to do at the same level as agencies and CHNEP doesn't offer the funding-level that would be required to go through all of the QA/QC standards with a NELAC laboratory. She explained that the conservation grants are more of a public education and engagement vehicle, though CHNEP can certainly talk to citizen groups about having some basic QA/QC protocols in place going forward. Ms. Hecker asked the committee member if there's anything they would like to recommend as far as cost-effective/reasonable QA/QC measures a community organization could implement, and CHNEP could start to incorporate those as standards when funding any kind of community water quality sampling. The committee member suggested bringing this discussion item back to the TAC for input on cost-effective QA/QC measures for future water quality sampling projects.

Another member mentioned that the City of Sanibel has been monitoring roadkill and wildlife mortality data on Sanibel roadways since 2021. Improvements were recently made to the program to use a Survey123 reporting tool, and it's been particularly useful post-Hurricane Ian to help the City monitor the recovery of wildlife on the island and has recently led to some management decisions around speed limits. The member explained that the City has been able to look at the interaction between wildlife mortality and speed limits and identify some hot spots on the island. The City recently added some signage to remind folks to slow down on Sanibel and Captiva roads. "Slow Down on Sanibel" is a new campaign they started to remind folks that island roads are buffered by National Wildlife Refuge and to slow down for wildlife. The member offered to provide a presentation on the City of Sanibel's efforts to the CAC, and Ms. Hecker responded that CHNEP will take them up on that for the next CAC meeting.

A committee member asked if the City of Sanibel has information/outreach materials for people living with wildlife, how to get along with the critters in your backyard, etc. She responded that they have developed some, and they do a lot of education on that but not necessarily develop physical materials. She further explained that Sanibel's biggest human-wildlife conflict is related to coyotes, and the City has relied heavily on FWC's resources on limiting human-coyote conflicts. The member commented that they are working on pond management campaigns, and they're getting a lot of push-back from certain members of the community who are convinced that alligators and snakes live in grasses around the ponds and are going to cause them harm if they allow any grasses over 5-inches to persist. The member said they are trying to find ways of overcoming those fears and said they are curious to hear about any messaging or efforts that have been effective to help alleviate those fears that are obstructing their ability to do pond and habitat improvements near waterways. Another member commented that Sanibel has done some great communication about generally living with alligators.



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Ms. Hecker explained that the CAC is working to develop a regional Living with Wildlife web hub and educational campaign with materials that would be based on the collective wisdom and resources available. She explained that CHNEP could then develop and print out rack cards that would direct people to this hub and would distribute that to CHNEP committee members for their dissemination and use in their educational efforts. A member asked if there would be a shared app where people could report roadkill, and Ms. Hecker responded that that has been discussed. She explained that CHNEP doesn't want to duplicate others already doing this work, but the CAC discussed creating something for the entire CHNEP area, such as a region-wide app that people could upload this data to, so that is something CHNEP will be exploring with the CAC and could be a future part of this campaign.

Agenda Item #8 – CHNEP Update — Jennifer Hecker, CHNEP

CHNEP's Executive Director, Ms. Jennifer Hecker, presented on programmatic activity occurring since the last Management Committee meeting, including those relating to administration, finance, outreach, and technical project updates. Highlights are as follows:

CHNEP planned and executed both the Technical Advisory Committee Meeting (12/4), Citizens Advisory Committee meeting (12/16), Management Committee meeting (1/9), and Policy Committee meeting (1/22) including lining up presenters, drafting agenda packet, updating Committee webpage, creating PowerPoints, drafting minutes, etc. The Director of Research and Restoration was restructured to a Research & GIS Manager and the Research & GIS Coordinator to a Restoration Manager position with Policy Committee approval at their last meeting. Positions were advertised and are now paused due to beginning interviewing phase. On-boarding materials were sent to new Policy Committee members Commissioner Trish Petrosky representing Lee County, Commissioner Tal Siddique representing Manatee County, Councilwoman Diana Giraldo representing the City of Fort Myers, and Commissioner Demetrius Petrow representing the City of North Port; new Management Committee members Boyd Lawrence, Planning Director for and representing the City of Punta Gorda and Shalina Odegard representing Peace River Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority, and new Citizens Advisory Committee members Ashley Cook, an alternate for Charlotte County, Suzanne Lindsey, a member for Polk County, and Steve Buczynski, a member for Hendry County. Spring budget reminder letters were drafted and sent to all CHNEP partners (counties and cities) to ensure consideration of respective dues' amount in their respective FY27 budgets. Sent in customized packets with respective project fact sheets. The CHNEP Monitoring, Finance, and Communications & Outreach Strategy documents (support documents for CHNEP 2025 CCMP), were approved at the January 2026 Policy Committee meeting and submitted to US EPA. The amended CHNEP – Charlotte County MOU, having previously been approved by the Policy Committee in January, was approved by the Charlotte County Board of County Commissioners at their February Commission meeting. All federal, state, county and city contact lists have been updated to reflect current elected leaders in CHNEP area, as well as their relevant staff. The new hardcopy CCMPs were mailed out to all federal legislators in the CHNEP area. Additionally, FY27 programmatic appropriations forms were submitted online to Congressmen Steube, Franklin, and Donalds, as well as Senator Scott and Moody's offices. CHNEP attended ANEP Spring Meetings in Washington D.C. & virtual EPA/NEP Workshop and met with all CHNEP federal legislative offices, with all CHNEP Congresspersons supporting NEP funding. Congressmen Buchanan, Donalds, Steube and Soto signed onto the House funding sign on letter and Congressman Franklin submitted our programmatic funding request.

For finance and grants, CHNEP staff updated the funding opportunities fact sheet and sent out historic funding opportunities notification to all CHNEP Committees; received the Notice of Award for the FY2026 EPA 320 funds which was approved by the Charlotte County BCC at their meeting in January; prepared and submitted invoice and backup documentation for reimbursement for FY2025 CHNEP SWFWMD Cooperative Agreement, with payments being received; received FY26 grant agreement with SWFWMD, which was approved and fully executed; received FY26 grant agreement with FDEP, which was approved and fully executed; submitted quarterly report and deliverables for FY26 FDEP



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grant for CHNEP Staff Support; received, reviewed, and processed Quarter 1 invoices for CHNEP FY26 Water Atlas Maintenance and Improvements project, for CHNEP 2026 Nature Calendar, and other invoices; and received and processed almost all annual dues payments for member counties and cities; and continued to process all private donations through checks and PayPal and updated the FY26 tracking spreadsheet as needed. CHNEP staff attended numerous partnership meetings (as outlined in meeting agenda packet). CHNEP For public engagement, CHNEP attended: the annual Kids Fishing Clinic at the Arcadia Rodeo in DeSoto County, where 30+ kids learned about stewardship, habitat and conservation; the 39th Annual Civilian Conservation Corps Festival at Highlands Hammock State Park where we shared information and resources about CHNEP projects with 100+ visitors; Water, Wings, and Wild Things Festival in Polk County, where 180+ second graders visited the CHNEP booth to learn about birds; and Wings Over Water Festival at Harns Marsh Preserve in Lee County, where 150+ visited the CHNEP booth for educational activities and CHNEP resources. CHNEP sent out monthly subscriber emails on relevant upcoming public engagement events in the CHNEP area; shared posts for “I Heart Estuaries” week, World Water Day, World Wetlands Day, Outreach events and much more; created and posted CHNEP project factsheets to the website for new and upcoming technical projects; and updated project factsheets related to county CVA and AAAs for the following counties: DeSoto, Glades, Hardee, Highlands, Manatee, and Sarasota. CHNEP staff attended numerous meetings throughout this period. For presentations, CHNEP presented on CHNEP-funded Polk County Vulnerability Assessment Flooding Models and Visualization Tools together with speakers from Polk County and the project consultant at the SFWMD Resiliency Coordination Forum; presented on the CHNEP Water Atlas: An Interactive Estuaries Report Card at the South Florida Water Management District’s 2026 Visiting Scientist Webinar series; presented on Leveraging Long-Term Water Quality Data and Partnerships for Assessment of Charlotte Harbor at the University of Florida (UF) Water Institute Symposium in Gainesville; and provided CHNEP Water Atlas Training to Heal Our Harbor’s Charlotte Harbor Ambassador Training (CHAT) program. CHNEP has 25 new Facebook followers, 5,452 subscribers for educational mailings, 2,466 unique visitors and 3,209 page visits to the CHNEP website, 19,719 YouTube views with 115 subscribers and 360 videos, and 649 total Instagram followers.

For Research Coordination Technical Projects Updates, the CCMP work plan objectives were furthered to ensure collection, reporting and access to consistent region-wide, technically sound data, to assess and report water quality status and trends to identify water quality, and to develop and support implementation of vulnerability assessment and adaptation plan recommendations. For the Coastal Charlotte Harbor Monitoring Network (CCHMN), the Q2 data was collected and submitted, and Q3 data collection for FY26 is underway. The updated CCHMN Quality Assurance Project Plan (QAPP), was approved by EPA. A fact sheet and infographics were created to share results from CCHMN trend analysis published in an article in Estuaries and Coast scientific journal (ESCO). The data from this study and all documents related to the CCHMN data are available on the CHNEP Water Atlas and Statewide Ecosystem Assessment of Coastal and Aquatic Resources (SEACAR). The CHNEP Water Atlas project, for which University of South Florida is CHNEP’s project contractor and partner, is to maintain and improve CHNEP Water Atlas to be a one-stop shop for data with analytical tools to act as a living report card of water and ecosystem health. Since last cycle, Q2 maintenance has been completed and Q3 is beginning.

The Charlotte County Vulnerability Assessment, which CHNEP is partners with Charlotte County, is a project to complete baseline Comprehensive Vulnerability Assessment that meets FDEP standards to identify vulnerable critical infrastructure. This will make Charlotte County eligible for additional state funding. Since last cycle, assets have been gathered and mapped, the overall flood modeling is done and data gaps for future refinement have been identified. The next step is the exposure and sensitivity analysis of each asset will be finalized, Adaptation Focus Areas map will be identified with strategies and recommendations drafted, and a public meeting will be held to present Draft Vulnerability Assessment.



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The Polk County Vulnerability Assessment project partners with CHNEP are Central Florida Regional Planning Council (CFRPC), and Polk County. The project will model additional rainfall flood scenarios, to be added to the chapters and recommendations. Since last cycle, the modeled additional flood scenarios included 200-year, 500-year, and compound flooding events (with saturated ground conditions). Model results were then used to select and create visualizations around a few strategic vulnerable of those more extreme flooding events. The next steps are the Polk County STAC mtg which will tentatively occur in May and the Polk County Board of County Commissioners meeting, and the final project approval is anticipated in June.

The Highlands, Hardee, DeSoto Adaptation Action Areas'(AAA) project partners are CFRPC and Highlands, Hardee, and DeSoto Counties. The projects are to identify AAA for each county based on data gathered for vulnerability assessments and draft plans with projects, engineering designs, and cost estimates for top 3 AAAs for each County. Since last cycle, the CVA critical asset refinement and identification of AAAs was completed, with draft of Plan 1 for each county underway. The next step is to review and approve each plan for top 3 AAAs and fold into CVA.

The Sarasota County AAA project partner is Sarasota County. The project is to identify the AAA based on data gathered for vulnerability assessments and draft plans with projects, engineering designs, and cost estimates for top 3 AAAs. Since last cycle, Sarasota County, which is handling the procurement, released the RFP in March and consultants have until April 20 to submit proposals. The next steps are the bid evaluation meeting which will be held in May, with notice of recommended award expected to be completed in beginning of June for the project to commence.

The Manatee County AAA, for which CHNEP is partnering with Manatee County, is a project that is TBD. CHNEP and County staff have met several times to find an appropriate resiliency project that meets funder timeline and requirements. CHNEP drafted an ILA and sent it to Manatee County for their legal department to review. CHNEP has also requested initial draft project scope. The next steps are to finalize the ILA and project scope of work in a follow-up meeting in the coming weeks. Once the is final scope, a work assignment will be issued to Manatee County for them to begin the procurement process.

CHNEP has also partnered with Glades County on its AAA. The project is to identify AAA based on data gathered for vulnerability assessments and draft plans with projects, engineering designs, and cost estimates for top 3 AAAs. Since last cycle, CHNEP and Glades County have finalized the project scope of work and CHNEP entered purchase requisition to begin procurement process for bid solicitation. The next steps are for CHNEP to review bids, select bidder and commence project.

The Water Quality Trend Assessment and Dashboard Tool is a project whose partners with CHNEP are all entities that are creating publicly accessible water quality data in the service area. The project is to create additional analysis and information on water quality trends to be shared through the CHNEP Water Atlas as an easily accessible tool and hub of status and trends information. Since the last cycle, CHNEP worked with Charlotte County to finalize the RFP, and that RFP went out for bid solicitation in early March. The next steps are to review the 10 bids received which will be scored at the bid evaluation meeting to be held in April. Once the contractor is selected, the project will commence.

The Peace River Basin Water Pollution Hotspot Assessment is a project whose partners with CHNEP are all entities that are creating a publicly accessible water quality data in the service area. The project involves data mining and cleaning to create a complete period of record dataset suitable for both traditional and novel trend analysis methods, to understand trends in nutrient concentrations and load in the Peace River basin, and to identify water pollution hot spots. Since the last cycle, CHNEP selected this project for FY26 funding, and the next step is an upcoming meeting in April/May to begin project planning.

For Watershed Coordination Technical Projects Updates, the CCMP work plan objectives were furthered to coordinate partner efforts around protection and restoration on a watershed scale, including



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mapping, monitoring, and reporting in order to monitor and restore estuarine habitats and environmentally sensitive lands.

For the Pine Island Flatwoods Preserve Wetland Habitat Enhancement, whose partner is Lee County, this project is to restore the natural hydrology of the site by removing abandoned shrimp farms and re-contouring the area to create water management areas to provide wetland habitat. Since the last cycle, the project began with the FWC gopher tortoise permit was approved. CHNEP is also working with Lee County to develop and create educational signage to go out at the restoration site once work is completed. The next steps are a pre-construction site visit in April, designing an educational sign, and doing restoration of project site.

The Tiki Point Harborwalk Living Shoreline Pilot Project's partners are CHNEP and the City of Punta Gorda. The project is to do engineering design and permit application preparation for the construction of a living shoreline to improve habitat and water quality, reduce erosion, increase resiliency, and mitigate the risks of flooding. Since the last meeting, a scope was prepared, an RFP was put out, bids were received, and a bid evaluation meeting was held to select contractor. The next steps are to get an ILA approved and executed, as well as select a contractor to commence the project.

The Yucca Pens Hydrologic Restoration Project Phase I is a project with FWC. This project is to conduct monitoring and modeling and create a final design and permitting for a large-scale hydrologic restoration of Yucca Pens – including design of a seepage wall and ditch blocks to block artificial channels for restoring more natural sheet flow and freshwater retention in the wetlands on-site. Since last cycle, an RFP went out for bid and a bid evaluation meeting was held to select the contractor bidder. The next steps are to have a contractor bidder approved and then the project work can commence.

The Submerged Aquatic Vegetation and Water Quality Restoration is a project whose partners are Charlotte, Lee, and Sarasota Counties, FDEP, Florida Sea Grant, FWC, SWFWMD, SCCF, and FGCU. The project is to conduct research and restoration using submerged aquatic vegetation, specifically tape grass (*Vallisneria americana*) in the canals in the Charlotte Harbor and Caloosahatchee basins to demonstrate the return on investment of tape grass restoration and to use that information to incentivize municipalities to participate. Since last cycle, the project was selected with FY26 funds, and the project planning is to commence this coming cycle.

The Lee County SEASCAPES Project is a project with the City of Cape Coral. The project is to construct multi-habitat artificial islands in saltwater lakes within the tidal Cape Coral canal system to create added habitat and improve water quality. Since last cycle, CHNEP and Cape Coral have held several meetings, ultimately deciding that Cape Coral would be handling procurement. CHNEP sent an ILA which was returned with Cape Coral's edits and are now legal for review. The next steps are once the ILA is finalized; it will go forward for approval and execution. Once finalized, the scoping will then begin and will be folded into a work assignment for the City who will hire contractor for the project to commence.

The Sarasota County Warm Mineral Springs Habitat Restoration is a project with the City of North Port. The project is to enhance the ecological integrity of the area surrounding Warm Mineral Springs by removing invasive plant species, planting native trees, and installing educational signage. Since the last cycle, several meetings were held, with the decision having been made that the City will procure services. The ILA was drafted, reviewed with City offering edits, and is now being reviewed by legal. The next steps are the ILA to be partially executed in April and then fully by May, with scoping happening in the interim. The project will begin once the contractor is selected.

The Polk County Lake Idyl Sediment Inactivation Project is a project whose partner is the City of Winter Haven. The project is utilizing EutroSORB G, an agent that binds to available phosphorus in the sediments, to reduce nutrient flux from Lake Idyl's highly organic sediments in response to impaired for nutrients designation by FDEP. Since the last cycle, CHNEP has selected the project



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proposal for funding from FY26 funds, and the next step is to attend an upcoming meeting in April/May to start project planning with partner.

The Charlotte County Exceptional Ponds Initiative is a project that partners CHNEP with Charlotte County. The project is to establish native landscaping in the littoral zone along the shoreline of select County stormwater ponds to address pollutant inflow. Since the last cycle, this project has been selected for FY26 funding. The next step is to hold an upcoming meeting in April/May to begin the project planning.

The Hardee Lakes Habitat Enhancement and Conservation is a project with Hardee County. This project is to restore habitat and install educational signage at Hardee Lakes Park to enhance ecological health, habitat quality, and public engagement. Habitat restoration will involve removal of nuisance and exotic vegetation, planting native species, and installing educational signage around the park. Since the last cycle, this project has been selected for FY26 funding. The next step is to hold an upcoming meeting in April/May to begin the project planning.

The Lee County Adaptation Plan Focus Areas 15 & 16 Stormwater Planning is a project with the Town of Fort Myers Beach. This project is to design changes to the stormwater network to enhance drainage along Indian Bayou Drive and Ibis Street that will reduce frequent flooding during high-tide and high-intensity rainfall events. Since the last cycle, CHNEP met with Town staff to have an initial project planning call where it was decided that the Town will do procurement and begin drafting the project scope of work. CHNEP drafted an ILA and sent it to the Town to have their legal department review it. The next step is that CHNEP will work with the Town to finalize the ILA and project scope of work.

The Hendry County Pollywog Creek Stabilization Project is a project with Hendry County. The project is to stabilize the bank of Pollywog Creek, which suffered severe erosion caused by Hurricane Irma. It entails using riprap and vegetative plantings to secure the soil, which will reduce sediment runoff and enhance water quality. Since the last cycle, CHNEP drafted a scope for RFP, and sent it to Hendry County for their review and edits. The next step is to finalize the RFP with Hendry County and for CHNEP to put into procurement.

There are also numerous science communications resources and fact sheets that CHNEP produces. New project fact sheets are available as well as basin water quality, basin seagrass health, state and federal research and restoration funding opportunities sheets.

Committee members commented that CHNEP is working on some very interesting projects. A member asked about whether CHNEP or a partner is doing the Peace River Water Pollution and Hotspot Assessment project, to which Ms. Hecker responded that CHNEP will likely be directly procuring that project. Ms. Hecker explained that there's a Peace River Collaborative working group forming that the CFRPC has been the lead in helping to organize to date. There is an upcoming working group meeting that CHNEP is co-hosting with CFRPC. The goal is to get all of the different counties and cities in the Peace River Basin together. CHNEP plans to utilize that forum as a way to get input in constructing the scope of work for this Hotspot Analysis. Ms. Hecker encouraged committee members to send her an email if they're interested in being part of the working group.

Another member asked how stakeholders can be more aware of what's going on with these projects, for example, the SAV *Vallisneria* planting project in the Caloosahatchee Basin. They said they would be really interested to hear how that project plays out, as Ms. Hecker mentioned that CHNEP is hoping that this research could create justification for BMAP credits that might incentivize municipalities to do more seagrass restoration. Ms. Hecker responded that the SAV project is only at the planning phase and said the committee member should send her an email to be included on upcoming meetings as CHNEP begins to form a working group to discuss what the project would look like. She encouraged committee members interested in being engaged in the scoping process to send her an email so that CHNEP can ensure the project meets as many members' needs as possible.



Ms. Hecker concluded by thanking the CHNEP team for all of their work on these projects. She explained that CHNEP hopes to fill the Research & GIS Manager and Restoration Manager positions before next cycle and will have two additional staff members to help manage the research and restoration projects. She encouraged committee members to email her if they would like to be involved with any of the upcoming projects and she will ensure those interested are included on upcoming working group meetings. Once CHNEP has a Research & GIS Manager and Restoration Manager onboard, they will then become the primary points of contact on those projects.

Agenda Item #9 – CHNEP FY27 Work Plan and Budget – Jennnifer Hecker, CHNEP

For fiscal year 2027, CHNEP has prepared a Master Work Plan and Budget that outlines all of its income, expenses and projects anticipated in the coming fiscal year. This agenda item was to present the plan to the Management Committee for Committee members to provide any comments in its finalization and to make a recommendation to Policy as to their potential approval. Once this is approved by Policy, the final EPA320 Workplan and Budget will accompany the FY27 EPA application forms in Grants.gov by June 1, 2026 grant application deadline.

Major changes from FY26 to the approved work plan and budget to proposed FY27 are as follows:

- Personnel budget last year decreased from \$669,810 to \$525,000 and two unfilled entry level positions; a Finance and Grants Specialist and a Restoration Specialist were eliminated, decreasing authorized personnel from 7 positions to 5. This year, personnel was slightly increased to \$570,000 (+ 45,000) given receiving full FY26 320 funding as well as FY26 final Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) funding. With restructuring of the previous Director of Research and Restoration and Research & GIS Coordinator to a Research & GIS Manager and a Restoration Manager, the Finance and Grants Specialist could now be reincluded. This keeps the personnel costs sustainable, while providing adequate staffing for the huge influx of projects CHNEP is project managing in all ten counties it serves.
- Overhead Administrative Fees have slightly increased from \$246,120 to \$256,000 (+9,880) due to the increased authorized CHNEP positions and associated human resource, information technology, and other associated operational support costs.
- Public Outreach has increased from \$94,500 to \$109,500 to allow for printing of new and reprinting of existing small publications like our popular kid's activity books.
- The FY26 IIJA award in the amount of \$909,800 was just received and will need to be approved by our host so we have these prior year funds ready for Research and Restoration. Additionally, we are using \$112,000 of the FY27 EPA 320 for the CHNEP Water Atlas Maintenance and Improvements, as well as \$20,000 of local funds for project contingency costs and \$15,000 for Lower Coastal Charlotte Harbor Monitoring Network water quality sampling. This results in a total FY27 Research and Restoration budget of an additional \$147,000.
- Policymaker education, our Association of National Estuary Program dues, rose from \$4,500 to \$9,500 with a majority vote of directors.
- \$32,000 of local funds will be put to our reserves to continue to build that for stability if future funding decreases do occur. We have built up one year (\$852,525.45) of staff salary and operating expenses in reserves already.
- The total revenue and expenses for FY27 will be \$1,124,000. This is reflective of our new post-IIJA funding level.

A member commented that, in Table 1, in the first row "FY26" needs to be changed to "FY27". Ms. Hecker responded that CHNEP will make that update in Table 1. Another member commented that they noticed Table 7 has 2026 Water Atlas Maintenance as \$78,720 and asked if there's an annual cost



just to maintain the Water Atlas and keep it up and running. Ms. Hecker responded that the maintenance is about \$90,000 annually and the differential between that and the budgeted \$112,000 for FY27 is to add new features and tools, enhance existing tools, add new data sources, and make it more user-friendly. She explained that CHNEP doesn't have a lot budgeted for improvements in FY27 because CHNEP has heavily invested in redeveloping the Atlas over the last several years.

Another member commented that, in Table 7 under the EPA 320 FY26 funding section, it lists SWFWMD as a contributor in the total funding line ("EPA, SWFWMD, & Local FY26 Total"). Ms. Hecker responded that that was carried over from the FY26 Work Plan and CHNEP will edit the table to remove SWFWMD from the EPA 320 FY26 total funding line before the FY27 Work Plan and Budget goes to the Policy Committee for approval. The member also inquired about the Reserve amount and asked if there's a reason that funds are still being added to the Reserve even though the goal of one year of operational support has been met. The member explained that Sarasota Bay Estuary Program (SBEP) and Tampa Bay Estuary Program (TBEP) have not reached their goal for Reserves to support one year of operational support and commented that SWFWMD is supportive of building the Reserve to support one year of program operations but believes any additional funding should be directed towards projects. Ms. Hecker responded that given the volatility of CHNEP's federal funding and growing programmatic operational costs, she believes it would be wise to continue to build the reserves at this time because it takes more than a year to be able to pivot and go after and obtain new grant funding to supplement. Ms. Hecker commented that CHNEP will bring the discussion to the Policy Committee and suggested that perhaps raising the goal for the Reserves to 2 years would be prudent because realistically, to get a new federal grant and get it all the way through execution to where those funds would be available to pay salaries would be at least 2 years. Ms. Hecker explained that the Policy Committee never indicated to stop building the Reserve at the original one-year operations reserve initial goal. CHNEP has several ongoing projects currently and wouldn't physically be able to spend that money right now if it were directed to projects. The other NEPs have larger staff and larger operational expenses and may require a higher amount in Reserve to meet the one year goal. Ms. Hecker concluded that given the large size of the CHNEP service area and small staff, and the large number of ongoing projects, it's a testament to the hard work and success of CHNEP to be able to meet this one year goal for Reserves.

CAC Co-Chair Aaron Zimmermann asked that the spelling of his name be fixed on page 5. Ms. Hecker responded that CHNEP will make this correction.

PHIL FLOOD MOVED, SECONDED BY PAUL SEMENEC TO RECOMMEND THAT THE POLICY COMMITTEE APPROVE THE FY27 WORK PLAN AND BUDGET WITH THE EDITS AND RESERVES CONCERN RAISED. THE MOTION WAS UNANIMOUSLY APPROVED WITH NO FURTHER DISCUSSION.

Agenda Item #10 – Innovative Solutions in Water Supply — Kristine Morris, Florida Department of Environmental Protection

Kristine Morris, Assistant Deputy Secretary for Ecosystem Restoration 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 while still protecting natural resources.

One Water initiatives and cooperative partnerships have helped break new ground in ensuring we meet our water needs while protecting the natural resources. Nevertheless, water conservation also remains a critical component to any water supply strategy, especially in times of drought. Using new approaches in techniques in how we manage water in all its forms (i.e. stormwater, wastewater, drinking water, etc.) can help us meet expanding supply needs while ensuring we have enough to restore and maintain our natural ecosystems.



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A member asked how long it would take for rainfall and wetland storage water to go into the Floridan aquifer. Ms. Morris responded that it varies and there are areas in the State that are like a sponge and water on the ground will go right into the Floridan aquifer. She explained that in the springs area in North Florida, the aquifer is very transmissive and the Floridan is the very top aquifer. Depending on the formations under an area, you might see some delay, that said, even in those transmissive areas up north, it can take time after the rain begins to see the rebound of water storage. Even after rain, it's important to communicate to the public that water conservation practices may still be needed as we achieve optimal water storage levels. Ms. Morris added that drought is part of the typical hydrologic condition so it's not necessarily independently harmful, and it can be very beneficial ecologically in some areas, but it can also cause harmful impacts, especially when it's persistent and widespread. Another member asked how the development of data centers and water usage associated with that fit into FDEP's water permit program. Ms. Morris responded that water use permitting is done by the Water Management Districts, so FDEP does not issue water use permits. She commented that the Governor has signed Senate Bill 484 which relates to the data centers so that may be something to look at, but she doesn't have any background information on how that will be implemented. She explained that there are existing permitting processes in place; there's a 3-part test to receive a water use permit, and within that 3-part test there are a number of enumerated conditions for permit issuance. The 3-part test is that 1) the use of water must be reasonable and beneficial, 2) it can't impact other existing legal users, and 3) it has to be consistent with public interest. Ms. Morris explained that one of those reasonable and beneficial criteria is that it does not cause harm to the water resources of the area, and those are general permitting conditions in place under the Statutes and each of the Districts' rules, each of the District's has adopted the criteria to implement that permitting process. A member commented that Ms. Morris mentioned that regional water supply plans are required when there's not existing adequate water supply or for the future and asked if this is something the Water Management Districts do as well and if they are in place. Ms. Bendixson responded that the District does the regional water supply plans, it's a 20-year outlook and they're updated every 5 years. She said there are areas, such as the Central Florida Water Initiative (CFWI) area, that are projected to not meet demand in that 20-year period, and so there's an effort between multiple Water Management Districts and the local municipalities to look at the different options to meet those future demands. The member asked if that incorporates MFLs too for the estuary, to which Ms. Bendixson responded that MFLs for the estuary are taken into account to see what's available. She concluded that the 20-year outlook projects out the future water needs, but that can change, which is why the plans are refreshed every 5 years. Ms. Morris also commented that water conservation is not baked into those projections themselves but is kind of deducted on the back-end. So, you'll see a growth pattern that you are trying to curb through the implementation of water conservation methods. She explained that inevitably, there's always some water conservation that's achieved through passive conservation such as new requirements for toilets, so you'll see that turnover naturally. She concluded that there will be water savings on top of the projections that we have and we're going to use alternative strategies to meet those future demands. Ms. Bendixson added that CFWI has proactively adopted the Florida Water Star program, so any new development will need to meet these additional requirements in addition to the passive conservation requirements.

Another member asked if the District has a preferred method as far as municipalities incorporating the Florida Water Star program into a Land Development Code or requiring development to obtain a Florida Green Building certification which includes something like that. Ms. Bendixson responded that the District does support it and offers training programs for the installers for sprinklers and outdoor equipment to be aware and meet these requirements. She said that new development is the focus and there's a retro program but it's very difficult to meet. She explained that, in her experience, communities have adopted the Florida Water Star program into ordinance to make this a requirement for the new development to meet projections. So what happens is they can apply and there's a rebate program associated with it to make it attractive to the developers so that the extra money they're spending on these fixtures is reduced a bit so they can recoup some of that cost, but they get a



certification and some literature for the new home owners, so it's also a selling point for that development. They don't have to do anything except apply for the program and then those certified inspectors will come out and ensure it meets all the requirements to get that certification. The member commented that it's a similar process to the Florida Green Building certification and explained that the City of Fort Myers is currently looking at which option they're going to go with.

Agenda Item #11 – Leveraging Wetlands as a Multi-Benefit One Water Tool for Water Supply and Water Quality Enhancement — Allison Lewis, Jacobs

Allison Lewis, Senior Technologist in Natural Treatment Systems with Jacobs Engineering, provided an overview of how constructed and natural wetlands can be leveraged as powerful, multi-functional components of One Water and alternative water supply (AWS) strategies.

Wetlands offer flexible pathways to enhance water supply reliability, improve water quality, and support regional recharge, whether the source water is reclaimed water, stormwater, or a blend of both. These systems can operate effectively in areas where infiltration is possible, as well as where geologic confinement limits traditional recharge approaches. In addition, wetlands provide an ancillary benefit of habitat creation and the opportunity for the public to connect with nature and learn about their local water resources.

Wetlands are a versatile One Water tool for both groundwater and surface water supplies, emphasizing four opportunity pathways: (1) Infiltration Wetlands for water quality polishing and natural recharge, (2) Wetlands followed by recharge wells provide recharge even in confined settings, while protecting water quality and public health, (3) Rehydration of natural wetlands to restore wetlands and repurpose reclaimed water, and (4) Wetlands for beneficial environmental flows, including those that provide public water supply. Together, these illustrate how wetlands can expand alternative water supply capacity, enhance regional hydrologic and natural systems resilience, improve water quality, and support long-term water security across diverse hydrogeologic conditions.

Augmenting Groundwater Supply: Infiltration Wetlands for water quality improvement and natural recharge - Infiltration Wetlands is a term that has been coined to describe groundwater recharge wetlands or infiltration wetlands and uses constructed wetland systems to polish water and promote passive recharge through infiltration into the aquifer. These systems are particularly effective where hydrogeologic conditions allow percolation through surficial soils into target aquifers. The 4G Ranch Wetlands consists of 176 acres of Infiltration Wetlands on a working ranch that receives up to 5 mgd of reclaimed water in Central Pasco County for groundwater recharge, where both the surficial aquifer and Upper Floridan Aquifer had been depleted due to significant groundwater withdrawals. The Ocala Wetland Recharge Park recharges up to 5 mgd of combined reclaimed water and stormwater across 33 acres of Infiltration Wetlands, supporting the restoration of Silver Springs by reducing nutrient loads in the Silver Springs BMAP and augmenting spring flow as part of the recovery strategy for the Silver Springs MFL. The wetland also serves as an award-winning valuable community park and is a Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail Site. Both projects have received multiple awards for contributions to water supply, water quality, and habitat creation.

Augmenting Groundwater Supply: Wetlands coupled with recharge wells - Because large areas, such as much of the southwest portion of Florida, have confining layers that prevent passive infiltration into the Floridan Aquifer System, wetlands can still be utilized in these settings by pairing them with recharge wells. Examples include the Flatford Swamp Groundwater Recharge Project which aims to recharge the Most Impacted Area of the Southern Water Use Caution Area and the Dona Bay Restoration Phase 3 Aquifer Recharge Project which integrates elements of the One Water philosophy to ensure a balance between water supply and nature. These demonstrate how wetland systems and recharge wells can work together to augment water supplies, increase operational reliability, and integrate reclaimed water as a sustainable resource, while protecting water quality and public health.



Augmenting Surface Waters: Rehydration of natural wetlands - In Florida, many wetlands have been hydrologically altered because of drainage, development, and water management practices, leading to degraded ecological function. Recognizing this, Florida Administrative Code Chapter 62 611 (Wetlands Application Rule) provides a regulatory framework that allows for the beneficial application of reclaimed water to hydrologically altered natural wetlands in order to enhance or restore wetland communities. The Boot Wetland Treatment System, a 115 acre cypress gum wetland, has received advanced secondary wastewater effluent since 1984 and serves as a long standing example of wetland restoration through reclaimed water rehydration. In addition, the Blacks Ford Swamp, a 230 acre wetland system operating since 1999, receives approximately 6 million gallons per day (mgd) of reclaimed water and provides both water quality improvement and ecological enhancement. Together, these case studies illustrate how the strategic use of reclaimed water can simultaneously support environmental restoration and societal water management goals.

Augmenting Surface Waters: Wetlands for beneficial environmental flows, including those that provide public water supply - Treated wastewater effluent is sometimes discharged to surface waters to provide beneficial environmental flows, particularly for waterbodies with established MFLs. Wetlands play a key role in improving the quality of this discharged effluent by naturally reducing nutrient loads. With their ability to remove micropollutants, wetlands can also serve as an effective water quality buffer for indirect potable reuse. Examples of this are the Huie Wetlands in Clayton County, Georgia and the Arcadia Treatment Wetland in Arcadia, FL. The Huie Wetlands provide a leading example of this indirect potable reuse approach, where treated wastewater is polished in wetlands before entering drinking water reservoirs. Demonstrating the resilient nature of these systems, the utility's general manager stated: "It's raining every day in Clayton County because we're putting right now about 10 million gallons back in our water supply." (Georgia Wetlands Offer Cure for Drought : NPR). The Arcadia Treatment Wetland incorporates an innovative intensification technique that injects pure oxygen into the treatment marshes, dramatically improving the reduction of TAN and TN before discharge to a Peace River tributary. This project provides a beneficial environmental flow upstream of the Middle and Lower Peace River MFLs and reduces nutrient loads to the river and Charlotte Harbor. Currently under construction, the treatment wetland will also serve as a public park in the future.

In conclusion, the ancillary benefits of wetlands and wetland-based augmentation of groundwater and surface waters supports water supply reliability, water quality improvement, ecological restoration, system resilience, and integrated One Water solutions.

A committee member commented that they are interested in groundwater recharge wetlands and asked if an involuntary load is created over time as the plants decay in the system that prevents water permeability. Ms. Lewis responded that they've investigated that and studied that over the years and we have the saying that "wetlands that don't perc still don't perc an inch today". She explained that they still see some leakage, but it doesn't end up confining the bottom of the wetland, so really, it's just looking at if it surfaces somewhere else. The City of Arcadia was concerned about the water surfacing, had to line that system. You could pair it with a recharge well if you get to the areas you do want to recharge. If you could have a rapid infiltration basin that was working correctly and can infiltrate, you could just do it through the wetland, unless you have very high infiltration rates where you're not going to be able to keep your wetland wet. That's usually up in North Florida where they'll probably need a liner because infiltration rates are so high. But you could pre-treat it with a wetland to get a water quality benefit.

Another member asked what the specific mechanisms are at play here that's producing the ammonia. Ms. Lewis responded that wetlands are limited by oxygen in that they could nitrify more (convert that ammonia to nitrate) if they just had more oxygen, so they're just providing the microbes that do that conversion the pure oxygen supply that they need to do that. Essentially, it's supercharging and letting it grow by delivering that pure oxygen, otherwise it's limited by atmospheric transfer. The technology



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has a 99% transfer efficiency of pure oxygen to the water, so it's actually dissolving up to 120 mg/L of dissolved oxygen, and it's a lot more cost effective than trying to do aeration in a wetland because it's only having the 2 ft of water per oxygen transfer, but delivering pure oxygen and dissolving it instead of just bubbling it increases that concentration and sends that super saturated water throughout the wetland, so it's maximizing the contact time. The committee member commented that their end-game with Nitrogen is getting it to nitrogen gas and getting it out, and asked if the oxygenation that's taking care of the ammonia also helps with nitrate conversion as well, or if they're having to look at other means to deal with that aspect of it, such as the carbon-side of it. Ms. Neufarth responded that that they're looking into that and explained that one of two the oxygenated wetlands that was done was based in Michigan and they actually found higher denitrification rates in the oxygenated wetlands than they find in classic systems, and we think it might be linked to carbon availability because the oxygen is breaking down and making more carbon from the plants available for denitrification, but that's continuously being studied. She explained that they've seen that they at least get similar denitrification rates, so they get that nitrification and denitrification to get to nitrogen gas, and anything that's converted to nitrate also gets converted to nitrogen gas but may even see further denitrification beyond just the ammonia input. The committee member explained that the main issue they deal with as a water manager in this area is Nitrogen, and the things they keep hearing to address this are: A) hyperoxygenation for part of that nitrogen cycle process, and B) the use of carbon-based infiltration like woodchips for an anerobic environment like your nitrites technology, and then C) nature-based solutions which South Florida is exploring outside of a more direct approach like alum treatments. The member asked what's been looked at to put it all together assuming that they will need some sort of combination of these methods to get rid of nitrogen outflow from their systems into the Harbor and estuaries. Ms. Neufarth responded that it depends on the speciation of nitrogen in your influent stream and what your effluent water quality goals are. She mentioned that they also have an ongoing industrial wastewater pilot that is really unique speciation and is very high nitrite, and their outflow limits are TN load and ammonia concentration. She explained that they do anerobic biochemical reactors before to get TN load compliance by converting it to nitrate gas and following it by a super oxygenated marsh to get to ammonia compliance and then whatever you convert to ammonia to nitrate also gets removed in that marsh. She said you can kind of mix and match these to create anoxic, anerobic, aerobic systems, you can kind of pair and stimulate the right type of wetland to accomplish what you're trying to do depending on the type of nitrogen and what your end goal is. The committee member said that their end goal is all of it. Ms. Neufarth responded that the nitrification and denitrification is happening in the wetland, so you're targeting all of the forms and the ultimate goal is to get it to nitrogen gas. The committee member explained that that's one thing they need help with because they find that if you just do a wetland and have water run through a wetland, you could end up having the wetlands be net exporters of nitrogen depending on how productive the plant systems are. They explained that's one of the things they noticed with their salt marsh treatment wetlands, their exiting total nitrogen levels were actually higher than the inflow rates. There's more load going out than what's coming in. Ms. Lewis suggested looking at the wetland design and the hydraulics and explained there can be short-circuiting.

Another committee member asked if they've investigated any of the project sites to see what responds better to a hurricane or compensates for excess run-off and flows given all the storms and increase in rate of storms that we've seen in the past 10 years or so. Ms. Lewis responded that they haven't studied that themselves but that it would be interesting to investigate. She explained that wetlands are resilient to those higher water levels and they usually take that into consideration in their designs and design embankments to ensure they can capture high swelling rates as well. She concluded that she hasn't seen any storm impacts to their wetlands so far. The committee member asked what the next best option is to get the maximum benefit for resiliency against a storm if you don't have a natural wetland to restore. Ms. Lewis responded that one technique is not better than the other and it's more about what your natural environment is. She concluded that there is a wetland application no matter where you are.



Another member asked if they're employing any innovative technology to try to eliminate PFAS and how they do that. Ms. Neufarth responded that they're just in the stages of studying it and they're doing a pilot study looking at ozone treatment wetlands and conventional wetlands and looking at surface flow mode and infiltration flow mode. Ms. Neufarth said that her hypothesis is that infiltration flow mode is going to have better water quality because you almost have this filter underneath the wetland. She explained that they're just gathering PFAS data now, and they're seeing some precursor transformations, but there are papers out there that have shown overtime the soils accrete and there's some absorption and there could be possible degradation. They're thinking that there's going to be some sort of enhancement. They're in year one of the pilot, and in year two they'll be looking at dosing it with a modified bentonite clay. The idea is to dose the system with it and allow it to drop out into the soils, and overtime have soil accretion. Wetlands accrete soil at a rate of about 1cm/year, and the goal is to see long-term what could happen as the anerobic conditions are more developed and it's getting buried, is there degradation? Ms. Neufarth concluded that they won't be able to figure it out in a 2-year pilot study but it sounds like the utility is going to keep it in operation.

Ms. Hecker added that CHNEP had EPA Region 4 leadership down here recently and took them to Arcadia and met with the City Administrator and she talked about this project and how excited and proud they were to be a part of this project. The City of Arcadia has seen damage from hurricanes and they've been trying to upgrade infrastructure and look at new and innovative ways to do that. CHNEP wants to share that kind of information with all the other members and exchange ideas on how we can keep progressing.

Agenda Item #12 – Management Committee Membership Updates & Discussion — Melynda Brown, Co-Chair

Melynda Brown (FDEP): The Charlotte Harbor Aquatic Preserve (CHAP) continues its monitoring efforts, with collected data being entered into SEACAR and the CHNEP Water Atlas. Approximately a year ago, CHAP acquired a 34-acre mangrove and submerged lands parcel in Lemon Bay known as Sandpiper Key, located along the route to Englewood Beach. A public meeting was held to discuss its management plan, and efforts are underway to incorporate additional submerged lands into existing management strategies. CHAP also participated in a clean marina workshop in Tampa and is considering hosting a similar event in Southwest Florida, potentially in Lee County, while seeking marinas interested in obtaining Clean Marina designation. The Clean Boating Southwest Florida position is currently open. The FWC Marine Debris Coordinator has raised concerns about hurricane-related vessels remaining in mangroves at Estero Bay and Bunche Beach in Lee County. These vessels, damaged by Hurricane Ian, are not classified as derelict because they are not in the water, and a removal plan is still being developed. Meanwhile, SFWMD has completed seagrass mapping efforts, with CHAP assisting in ground-truthing activities. Additional observations from SCCF regarding tapegrass may also support ongoing mapping and monitoring efforts.

Kali Spurgin (FWC): No updates for projects in CHNEP area. The FWC Commission meeting is on May 13th at the Calusa Sound Convention Center in Fort Myers. That will be an opportunity to come and learn more about all that FWC is doing.

Phil Flood (SFWMD): There is a renewal of a dispersed water management contract for Mudge Ranch, which is a small ranch in Glades County. The program partners with private landowners to redirect stormwater onto their properties, fields, and wetlands to prevent it from flowing into the Caloosahatchee River. The initiative has been in place for 10 years and has been renewed for another decade. A new dispersed water management project will soon begin in Glades County. This Snake Land Cattle water and nutrient retention project is expected to store approximately 18,000 acre-feet of water annually and reduce pollutant loads by about 700 pounds of phosphorus and 6,000 pounds of nitrogen each year entering the Caloosahatchee. The contract term for this project is expected to last 10 years. The annual South Florida Environmental Report, which documents ongoing projects,



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Large Multi-Purpose Room – Centennial Park
1120 Centennial Boulevard, Port Charlotte, FL 33953

monitoring activities, and related science and research, and is available on the organization's website. The state legislature will meet the following week in a special session to finalize the budget.

Vivianna Bendixson (SWFWMD): The Cape Haze project should be awarded here shortly. There was a virtual public meeting held with good attendance and positive support from the community. The Upper Peace River MFL reevaluation should be scheduling the public meetings this summer. The stakeholder and technical peer review has been completed. It is up on the website for review. There is still an opportunity to provide input at the public meeting.

Matt DePaolis (SCCF): An Army Corps Colonel visited the estuary and was informed of the severity of ongoing water shortages that have persisted for hundreds of days and are significantly impacting the ecosystem. Following this, they conducted a scouting survey at Ding Darling to check for the presence of tapegrass at previously known sites and additional western locations. Tapegrass was found at multiple sites, but the plants were small and thin, showing signs of salinity stress, indicating continued environmental strain. With tapegrass still present in the system, it should be treated, even though it has reduced in abundance. Estuary stress is ongoing and there is hope that emerging El Niño conditions may bring beneficial storms. In collaboration with the City, the team is installing monitoring wells across the island to better understand how water management practices, including weir placement, are affecting elevated salinity levels. The monitoring will also help clarify changes in vegetation patterns, such as the increased presence of buttonwood in areas where it was not historically common, likely influenced by storms and sea-level rise. These efforts aim to improve understanding of groundwater behavior and its interaction with altered hydrological systems, including deep lake features on the island. A new website section dedicated to water quality issues will be launched soon. Additionally, the program has taken on local monitoring responsibilities previously supported by the International Osprey Foundation. Ospreys will now be used as an indicator species for assessing estuary and waterway health, and the collaboration with the foundation will continue in support of wildlife monitoring efforts.

Lisa Waskiewicz (LA-MSID): The Crest Project will be finishing in June and there may be a grand opening event.

Brandon Moody (Charlotte County): Multiple RFPs are currently underway for a tide gauge water elevation monitoring network, which is already operational and expected to be publicly accessible in the coming weeks. The network will expand by 20–25 gauges across the County to improve tracking of flood risks and pollutant loading. A proposal for compound flood modeling is expected to be submitted to the County Commissioners for approval soon. If approved, the project will be conducted by the University of Florida over five years to produce countywide flood models. These outputs will be peer-reviewed and integrated with existing planning tools such as watershed management plans. The County has been coordinating with FDEP. While the County has historically had more rural stormwater standards, increasing development is leading to more stringent requirements, including obligations to address areas with Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs), such as East Coral Creek. Coordination with the Cape Haze project team is being considered to ensure water quality efforts are aligned across the broader watershed. The County is grateful to CHNEP for ongoing work on the Vulnerability Assessment. With new state funding secured, the effort will move directly into adaptation planning. A pilot eelgrass planting program has shown unexpected success, with *Vallisneria* rapidly expanding within canals over an eight-month period. The results will be presented to the County Commissioners in the coming week.

Tabitha Biehl (Polk County): County Commissioners approved a \$70 million watershed recovery project funded through the Community Development Block Grant for disaster recovery. The project will focus on the Upper Peace River system, including Gibson to Parker, Saddle Creek, Hancock, and the Peace River. The initiative has three main components. First, it will upgrade water infrastructure and improve water management across the basin, including efforts to better move and store water. Second, it will implement water quality improvements, including Harmful Algal Bloom (HAB)



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mitigation programs designed to remove pollutants like fertilizer and fuel, with plans to create a long-term, potentially sustainable system near Lake Hancock or nearby areas. Third, it will complete construction and treatment work at the headwaters of the Peace River, where Saddle Creek and Peace Creek originate; this portion is already 90% designed. The project is expected to be completed within four years and aims to significantly improve both water management and water quality in the region.

Paul Semenec (Sarasota County): Phase 3 of the Dona Bay Hydrologic Restoration Project focuses on aquifer recharge. The project team expects to solicit a contractor for exploratory well construction in the summer, with construction anticipated to begin in October. Phase 5 of the Dona Bay project has been cancelled. It would have installed a low-flow weir in the Curry Creek Canal to limit freshwater flow between Roberts Bay and the Myakka River. The plan was halted due to opposition from nearby residents with docks and boats along the canal. A letter is being prepared for the RESTORE Council to request reallocation of those funds from Phase 5 to Phase 3. For the Alligator Creek Stream Restoration Project, EHC, Inc. was selected as the construction contractor in April. The project is scheduled for a contractor award on July 7, with a notice to proceed expected in August and construction to follow. A groundbreaking ceremony is being coordinated for late August. The project must be completed by August 2028 due to NOAA grant requirements.

Justin Mahon (Fort Myers): The City shares Sanibel's concerns regarding FEMA and is particularly frustrated related to electrical work. There are additional challenges in that area. The City received a \$6 million NRCS grant supporting seven city canals. The project initially began as hurricane debris removal but has since shifted toward de-mucking and flow restoration. The City expressed gratitude for NRCS flexibility in allowing the scope change and hopes the work will lead to measurable improvements in water quality and the restoration of older urban stormwater canals. If successful, the approach could serve as a useful model for future hurricane-related grant projects. The City's Hurricane Preparedness Expo will be held May 9th at the Calusa Sound Convention Center.

Debra Butler (Hardee County): The CHNEP-funded upcoming Hardee Lakes project to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Upland Exotic Plant Management Program will hopefully help significantly address the site's issues and restore Hardee Lakes to its former condition as a valued natural area.

Stefan Kaley (North Port): The Natural Resources team is finalizing the scope of work for the CHNEP grant related to the Warm Mineral Springs Restoration Project and is preparing to advance several steps in the project. In April, the department engaged nearly 1,000 residents through multiple outreach events, including a successful native tree giveaway for city residents. Additionally, the newly established land acquisition program has issued its first 11 letters of interest to owners of priority properties, with hopes of receiving responses and acquiring valuable land for the city.

Hank Flores (Punta Gorda): The City issued an RFP for the Tiki Point Living Shoreline project and extended the deadline twice but received only one bid. The submitted proposal will be reviewed to determine whether it can be accepted. The RFP covers both pre- and post-construction monitoring.

Holly Milbrandt (Sanibel): There is continued progress on its Vulnerability Assessment while the Chief Resilience Officer advances the Adaptation Plan, with the first public meeting scheduled for June. A recent bid opening was held for a federally and state-funded dredging and muck removal project in the Sanibel Slough. The Slough, which functions as the Island's internal freshwater body and stormwater reservoir, has become increasingly saline due to repeated storm surge events. The project is expected to be completed this summer and will also evaluate potential nutrient removal benefits tied to its Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) requirements. The City is also engaged in a long-running dispute with Federal Emergency Management Agency over the restoration of the Jordan Marsh Water Quality Treatment Park, a filter marsh system built in 2019. Severe impacts from hurricanes Ian, Helene, and Milton destroyed electrical infrastructure and freshwater vegetation, leaving the system unable to function as intended. While the site still exists as a wetland, its enhanced water treatment capabilities



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have not been restored. The agency requires restoration to pre-storm conditions with limited mitigation improvements under Public Assistance guidelines, but a cost gap of approximately \$400,000 remains between consultant estimates and FEMA's funding determination. The project is currently in the appeal process. With support from SCCF, the City hosted representatives from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, including Colonel Billman and Major Bill, for field discussions on the Caloosahatchee River. The visit focused on concerns regarding how current water management practices are affecting regional environmental conditions.

Felicia Burks (U.S. EPA Region 4): The EPA congratulated CHNEP and committee members for reaching their reserve goal. EPA Region 4 issued a South Florida funding opportunity with about \$8 million available and received at least 92 applications. The applications are currently being reviewed and ranked through work group discussions to determine awards.

Vanessa Bauzo (FDACS): The Florida Statewide Agricultural Irrigation Assessment will be released on July 1st. An annual report is being worked on that will detail agricultural lands enrolled in its programs, as well as identify potential acres for future enrollment and acres that are unsuitable for enrollment. The report is expected to be available online soon.

Sheila McNamara (CFRPC): CFRPC is conducting an Agricultural Land Use Conversion Study that originally focused on citrus but has expanded to examine broader drivers and trends of agricultural land conversion in the region. It is also developing a regional inland local government resilience toolkit, incorporating feedback from counties on useful resources. Noting that most existing toolkits are designed for coastal communities, CFRPC's version will specifically address the needs of inland communities and is intended for use across the state.

Agenda Item #13 — Public Comment — Melynda Brown, Co-Chair

One member of the public commented that they enjoyed hearing about all of the work everyone is doing in the region.

Agenda Item #14 – Future Meeting's Topics, Location and Date — Melynda Brown, Co-Chair

The upcoming CHNEP 2026 Management Committee Meeting dates are: 9/4/2026, 1/8/2027, 5/7/2027, and 9/3/2027. If you have ideas of new research and restoration topics and/or presenters, please email Jennifer Hecker, CHNEP Executive Director at jhecker@chnep.org.

Agenda Item #15 — Adjourn — Melynda Brown, Co-Chair

Meeting was adjourned at 12:37 pm.