



Executive Committee Quarterly Meeting
Via Video Conferencing

November 18, 2020
4:00 pm

Minutes

Attendees: Matt Keeling, *Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board*; Kristin Hardy, *Cal Poly*; Marshall Ochylski, *LOCS*D; Bill Henry, *Bay Foundation*; John Flaherty, *Central Coast Outdoors*; Ethan Bell, *Stillwater Sciences*; Jeremiah O'Brien, *Morro Bay Commercial Fishermen's Organization*; Bruce Gibson, *San Luis Obispo County*; Becca Kelly, *Morro Bay Harbor Department*; Suzanne Marr, *USEPA*; Ann Kitajima, *MBNEP Staff*; Lexie Bell, *MBNEP Staff*.

1. Introductions and Updates

- Becca Kelly: We've had big king tides recently, resulting in a good turnover of water. The city has a few construction projects. Rose's Landing is adding a hotel area and walkway. The Coast Guard is adding onto their station. Parking and detours are a bit of a mess right now. The city met with the Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) to talk about dredging funding for next year. Dredging is planned for the spring. A new regulatory person came through to check things out and learn the history of the project. Discussions began about the next time there will be a need to do the bigger dredging effort (last done in 2016) which usually takes place every five to seven years. Normally that happens in the winter (outside of snowy plover season) due to the pipeline that has to run down the beach. This effort will likely occur in 2021 or 2022.
- Lexie Bell: Our staff has been working on a number of grant applications, one of the benefits of working remotely. We've acquired funding for eelgrass for next year. We have a few applications out for sea level rise work, for an eelgrass research and restoration partnership with Cal Poly, and for addressing the San Luisito fish passage barrier at Highway 1. The Coastal Conservancy is interested in having us amend our application and try for a different type of funding for the fish passage project. We don't have a lot of updates from DC as far as changes with the new administration. Hopefully we'll have more info in February in terms of shifts in priorities for EPA, etc.
- Kristin Hardy: As expected, it's been hard to stay in touch within the department as everything is happening remotely. Kevin Johnson is the new Sea Grant Extension Specialist. He has a special position dually between the Biology Department and Sea Grant. He is involved in research intended to bridge the gap between the academic side and the community, especially in the area of aquaculture. He has done work on genetic adaptation in oysters, and he is interested in working on native oyster restoration. Kristin expects he will be a great addition to the area and encouraged us to meet with him. Research at Cal Poly is ongoing at a reduced pace. They are approved to be in the labs, so grad students are able to do their work. They are still planning on reduced in-person instruction for next quarter. The Center for Coastal Marine Sciences doesn't have much to report. They will hold a meeting at the end of the quarter.
- Jeremiah O'Brien: He met with Kevin yesterday and thinks he'll be a great addition to the area. The fishing industry has been struggling. They've lost a lot of demand because of COVID since so much of fish goes to restaurants. This limits what they can bring in and hampers them on the price. They've generally lost about 30% across the board pricewise from previous years. Jeremiah has observed that eelgrass is doing well. He's seeing big rafts of wrack between boats, and it was especially visible with the recent king tides.
- Suzanne Marr: There has been no dialog yet with the incoming administration, so staff feels like they're treading water a little bit. New guidance was approved at the beginning of the fall for the NEPs, so we can review to determine how specifics might affect our program. There are some nuances with budget and fundraising activity. Lexie has been doing a great job with the Association of National Estuary Program (ANEP) meetings. We can send out the links to the recorded webinars from the recent ANEP

Tech Transfer. Topics were integrating of open science into NEP work, climate resilience, congressional outreach, and EPA programs.

- John Flaherty: Tourism is continuing to do well. The numbers since the summer have been way up, especially kayaking in the bay. The waterfront areas and beaches are crowded on weekends. The numbers have been tailing off a bit recently. He's seeing quite a bit of eelgrass this year, with notable increases in the extent and density. They're seeing it in Sharks Inlet on the mudflats. There are whole channels just lined with eelgrass, and it seems like a big increase from last year.
- Matt Keeling: The Water Board is maintaining their COVID reality with a remote work force. There will be a number of staff retirements, so they are focused on a structural reorganization and strategic planning. They've had a 15 to 25% resource reduction with furloughs, contact tracing redirect, etc. and future budget cuts are expected. Their work that is of greatest interest to the group is the Agricultural Order 4.0 process, which has been underway since 2017. They released a draft earlier this year. They extended the comment period and have had six days of public comment meetings since the summer. The next Water Board meeting on Dec 9 and 10 will discuss this subject. They are working under a court order to adopt the order by Jan 31, 2021 but got an extension until April 16, 2021, which will be a challenge to meet. They want the new order to more comprehensively address the impacts of irrigated agriculture.
- Bruce Gibson: Things are mostly proceeding as normal. The County's efforts on the Los Osos Community Plan are still on track to go to the Board of Supervisors on December 15. This should include the Habitat Conservation Plan being close to the final sign-off. The plan launches us for in 2021, so they're working to get it certified by the Coastal Commission. In Los Osos, the County relocated about a dozen folks encamped at the mid-town site by the library. Part of the reason that the County took this action is because the site is supposed to be preserved as habitat. The public health impacts and safety impacts were getting to be extensive. They are expecting a County-wide effort to increase attention to folks who are in encampments. Matt said this is an issue for all Water Boards, mostly focused on trash and human waste. The Water Board is trying to keep a pulse on what's going on and encouraged the County to reach out.
- Bill Henry: The Bay Foundation met a few weeks ago and approved two of the three community projects, the pollinator effort and microplastics monitoring. They recommended funding \$15k total. They also discussed business sponsorships. The Estuary Program was recently approached by a new marijuana dispensary in Morro Bay to form a business partnership. The Bay Foundation discussed the benefits and challenges. Lexie is going to gather more info and get back to the Board. In particular, she was going to see what other NEPs are doing. Suzanne said we should discuss further, in particular because marijuana is not legal federally.
- Marshall Ochylski: Happy to hear about eelgrass. The Los Osos Community Services District (LOCSD) is operating business as usual. The Basin Management Committee is working on the water recycling facility. They are working on an implementation plan for the actions to reduce seawater intrusion into the groundwater basin. They set up a number of discussions about what implementation strategy and priorities should be. When they have an approved budget in December, then they should have a better idea of the priorities and timing. For the LOCSD, there's a requirement to put in the east side well, which they have been dealing with for a number of years. The plan is to move to a well site at Bayridge Estates. The Water Recycling Facility is designed to handle about twice the flow it actually receives, thanks to successful conservation efforts. There may be more water conservation yet to occur. The County is considering a proposal to capture stormwater and put it into the sewer system (infiltration). Significant funding is needed for this effort.
- Ethan Bell: Stillwater Sciences is working with Estuary Program to manage the invasive pikeminnow population in Chorro. This has been an annual effort for four years now. He feels they are seeing a pretty successful suppression of the pikeminnow population, with steelhead juveniles really rebounding. In the lower reaches of Chorro Creek, they are seeing very few pikeminnow. They are seeing more upstream where they haven't done as much management. Pikeminnow are growing to big sizes in that creek partly by consuming crayfish (also invasive).

2. Public Comment – None presented.
3. Agenda Revisions – None presented.
4. **ACTION:** Consider Approval of August 19, 2020 EC meeting minutes.

Vote: Marshall motioned to approve, John seconded. All in favor. None opposed.

5. **ACTION:** Recommendations on Community Project Applications (see attached)

The group liked the approach of the updated Community Project program. The technical reviewer input seems to be focused and effective. For the microplastics monitoring project, Kristin says she's always concerned when data can't be published in a peer reviewed journal. While we clearly see value in partnering with Cal Poly on peer reviewed journals, we still see this project as an opportunity to get some initial data as we have no data. The work may help Dr. Adams win additional funding for more extensive work. Suzanne thinks microplastics work is important to get started. Kristin encouraged Dr. Adams to find skills within the university for future work. Matt was interested in subsequent projects this would support. Dr. Adams is interested in pursuing this topic in the future. The Estuary Program will consult with the San Francisco Estuary Institute and other NEPs on any future efforts. The group saw the value of the work as a public education effort. Becka pointed out how it inspires and impacts Morro Bay High School students who will be utilize the educational curriculum to be developed. Ethan commented that it's great to get baseline info and based on what they learn, they can expand and improve future work. For the monarch and pollinators project, Matt thought about the challenge of better assessing outcomes, an identified area for us to develop from our last Program Evaluation.

Vote: Kristin moved to fund the Microplastics Monitoring and Monarch and Pollinator projects per staff recommendations. Matt seconded. No objections. All in favor.

6. **DISCUSSION:** Presentation of Semi-annual Report (see attached)

Twice a year the Estuary Program submits a semi-annual report to EPA to provide an update on the budget and tasks. At this point in the five-year grant cycle, we have expended 93% of our current 320 grant and met 208% of our match requirement.

7. **DISCUSSION:** Program Evaluation (PE) update (see attached)

We received our final PE letter from EPA in September. They noted our strengths as outreach and public involvement and projects like the Chorro Creek Ecological Reserve. They noted some areas for improvement: reporting measurable outcomes, completing our Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP) update which are required every five years, expanding outreach to more diverse audiences, and increasing efforts related to water reuse and hazard mitigation. As for the CCMP update, we've done great deal of work editing to get them a final version by end of the fiscal year. This is a minor update rather than a more involved revision. We will be adding measurable outcomes to the action plans wherever we can. For other action plans, we will focus on projects that allow us to establish numeric targets for certain aspects of the CCMP. We've been working on this for a couple of years and it's a lot of work to get through analysis. So the version we'll working on will get us part way there and then we'll spend the next five years expanding on this for the next version. For expanding outreach to diverse audiences, our focus is on translating our most popular outreach materials into Spanish. For water reuse and hazard mitigation, we are focused on stormwater management. We will also look at how as an NEP we plan for major disasters, establish plans for maintaining operations and ensuring we can rapidly assess impacts, etc.

We will come to EC with an update on our PE progress every six months.

8. **DISCUSSION: 2019 Baywide Eelgrass Map**

We reviewed the 2019 eelgrass maps. We discussed the importance of having a groundtruthing effort to verify the map. Ethan commented that from his time on the bay, he saw more eelgrass recently than present in the 2019 map. We are interested to see what 2020 eelgrass looks like and are partnered with Cal Poly on a drone mapping project to create a baywide eelgrass map.

9. **DISCUSSION: Program Highlights**

- **Virtual Fundraiser:** We sent out information on the event to the EC. It is a virtual event tomorrow with a live band and viewing of the documentary made a few years ago. A donor is matching donations. Our fundraising events are kept to a minimum because they're quite time intensive, but it's important for us to have some unrestricted dollars to pay for things that the grant won't and to help us weather potential budget counts.
 - **Chorro Creek Ecological Reserve Update:** Plant survival count of plants planted last spring: 98% survival due to California Conservation Corps dedication with watering during the dry season and weeding. The last 100 plants are going in this week. Eventually it would be great to lead another field tour to see the site with the planting complete.
 - **Nature Center Update:** The Nature Center is closed but we've been doing a lot of work on updating it. We are redoing the habitat mural information to make it more interactive, with a new panel to be installed in early 2021. We are also designing an interactive steelhead lifecycle display to accompany the fish tank. We will work with our eelgrass grant to add a new exhibit with US Fish & Wildlife Service funding.
 - **2020 Bioassessment Results:** We recently received the 2020 data. The scores were similar to historic data.
10. Adjourn at 5:54. Motion by Kristen, seconded by Becka. All in favor. Adjourn to next meeting of February 17, 2021 at 4:00 pm via video conferencing.

Attachments:

- Minutes from August 19, 2020 EC meeting
- Summary of Community Project Applications for Fall 2020
- Semi-annual Report
- PE Letter