



Executive Committee Quarterly Meeting
Estuary Program Offices, Morro Bay, CA
via Video Conference Call

February 19, 2024
4:00 pm

Staff Report

1. Introductions and Updates
2. Public Comment
3. Agenda Revisions
4. **ACTION:** Consider Approval of November 20, 2024 Executive Committee (EC) minutes (see attached)
5. **ACTION:** EC member re-election

The interest seat members of the EC serve three-year terms. Lisen Bonnier, who fills the Watershed Land Management seat, was elected in February 2022 and is interested in serving another term.

Staff recommends EC approval of the re-election of Lisen Bonnier for another three-year term.

6. **DISCUSSION:** FY26 320 workplan (see attached)

Each year at our February meeting, the EC discusses the potential workplan tasks for the upcoming grant and determines if any additions are needed. The additional funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) grant has resulted in a shift in our spending approach. We now tend to focus our 320 base funding on staffing and other ongoing operational costs, while BIL funding is used to support short-term projects. Thus, the proposed workplan tasks for FY26 for the 320 funding are expected to be substantially similar to those for FY25. At this time, the funding amount for FY25 is not yet known, so we are holding these initial workplan discussions assuming the same amount of funding as for FY25, which is \$850,000

The major changes to the workplan tasks are the addition of a task for planning and implementing State of the Bay events and a task for invasive species management. In the past we've had several invasive species management projects distributed throughout the Restoration tasks, but we thought we might bring them together under a new workplan task.

The following are the expected workplan tasks for FY26, including any major changes (shown in italics).

Workplan Task Categories for 320 in FY26:

Restoration and Conservation

- Land Conservation and Planning
- Restoration Maintenance and Monitoring

- Other Restoration
- Conservation and Restoration Project Development
- *Invasive Species Management - New*
- Fisheries Management

Monitoring and Research

- Monitoring Program Coordination
- Reporting and Analysis
- Data Management
- Quality Assurance
- Project Effectiveness Monitoring
- Eelgrass Monitoring and Research
- Partner Research Efforts
- State of the Bay Analysis

Education and Outreach

- Communications
- Education
- Nature Center Maintenance & Operations
- Community Engagement and Stewardship
- Mutts for the Bay
- *State of the Bay Events - New*

Program Administration

- Manage Committees and Partnerships
- Grants and Contracts Administration and Financial Management
- General Administration and Human Resources Management
- Tracking Implementation of the Management Plan and Workplan
- Community Projects Program

7. DISCUSSION: Program Evaluation update

The Estuary Program is currently undergoing its 2025 Program Evaluation (PE), a comprehensive review that occurs every five years to assess our program's progress, effectiveness, and standing as a National Estuary Program (NEP). This evaluation is conducted by EPA Headquarters, EPA Region 9, and an ex-officio NEP director. The PE components include:

- **Comprehensive PE Narrative Document**
We are preparing a detailed narrative report outlining accomplishments over the past five years in advancing our Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP). This includes administrative, financial, and structural updates, progress in community engagement, responses to past PE challenges, and updates on monitoring and restoration efforts. As part of this effort, we have developed a new public-facing CCMP tracker, "From Plan to Progress: CCMP in Action," which highlights our completed projects over the last five years. This resource is available online: [MBNEP CCMP Tracker](#).

- **Site Visit (May 23 – July 15, 2025, Exact Date TBD)**
The second part of the evaluation is a two-day site visit with the EPA review team. We are working to finalize the schedule. As part of the visit, we are planning a Partner Open House on one of the evenings, where we will invite the Bay Foundation Board, EC members, and project partners to meet the EPA representatives and discuss ongoing collaboration efforts. We will continue to provide updates as we finalize details. Please let us know if you have any questions or suggestions for the upcoming evaluation process.

8. DISCUSSION: Rose Foundation grants update

The Rose Foundation for Communities and the Environment is implementing the Central Coast Community-Based Water Quality Grants Program, managing the allocation of \$1.2 million in PG&E settlement funds to support local water quality initiatives. The funds were used to develop and implement a grants program aimed at improving water quality in the Central Coast region. Key activities included developing a two-tier grant application process, publicizing the funding opportunity, convening a third-party advisory board, evaluating and selecting grant applications, and executing contracts with grantees. Thirteen projects were approved, with details provided in Attachment 1, which lists the grantee organizations, project names, start dates, and project durations.

9. DISCUSSION: Habitat Protection and Restoration Strategy (HPRS) update

This planning document is a requirement for the NEPs. We had initially drafted a document and submitted it to EPA in Dec 2021, but it was sent back and required substantial edits. The HPRS provides a comprehensive, watershed-wide management approach to the health and climate resilience of habitats and communities of the Morro Bay watershed that will inform future planning and project efforts. The HPRS was approved by EPA in January. The plan is available here: <https://www.mbnep.org/habitat-protection-restoration-strategy/>

10. DISCUSSION: Program Highlights

- **Administration Updates:**
 - The Estuary Program is currently going through its annual single audit. Our BIL FY25 grant has been stalled by EPA given federal issues and challenges in implementing executive orders associated with administration changes.
 - Our BIL funds are now accessible following the February 3 litigation, in which California and other states successfully secured a temporary restraining order (TRO) requiring federal agencies to release obligated funds. This means we now have access to the \$1.15M in BIL funding that had been frozen, allowing us to move forward with previously approved projects and financial commitments.

However, since litigation is still ongoing, we are remaining cautious and strategic in case of potential future freezes or funding uncertainties. The ED is continuing to stay in close communication with the Association of National Estuary Programs (ANEP), other NEP directors, and our policy consultants in D.C. to monitor developments and coordinate messaging with decision-makers. ED is still planning to go to DC in March for the Spring ANEP meeting, although we are unsure if EPA will be hosting. The directors have agreed that now more than ever it is important that we have a presence in D.C. and meet with elected official staffers.

- **Monitoring Updates:**

- Staff have been busy planning for spring fieldwork including eelgrass monitoring and bioassessment. Cal Poly just completed their baywide drone flights to support eelgrass mapping efforts. Staff supported the effort by conducting groundtruthing. Cal Poly faculty and students are continuing to develop a model to automate the classification of eelgrass to create a baywide map using the high resolution images collected by the drone. Staff completed review of the 2024 bioassessment data and shared the results in a [recent blog post](#).

- **Restoration Updates:**

- We are continuing our partnership with USGS on planning for sea level rise and adaptation measures. We continued field monitoring (reading sediment elevation tables, sediment coring) this fall and are planning for the first TAC meeting in March.
- Unfortunately, during the feasibility study for improving the Adobe Rd. crossing for fish passage on San Luisito Creek, we discovered that the Whale Rock water line, Chorro Valley water line, and a gas line run through the project area. We are exploring all feasible options. However, given the complexities at the site, for example the Whale Rock water line is the only water source for Cal Poly, the liability on the project in addition to the added costs would be very challenging.
- In January, we completed drone flights (DEM) along Walters Creek to support future floodplain enhancement projects. If funding and permitting come through soon, we would complete implementation of middle Walters this spring. Walters Creek only has flow during very wet winters, so lack of rain may delay the project since we need flow in the creek to move forward with implementation.
- For the historical ecology study, SFEI has completed a draft of the habitat types circa 1850. We have scheduled a TAC meeting with a four paid advisors for review in March.
- We worked to remove invasive ice plant on the City of Morro Bay's section of the sandspit in January. All new growth from areas treated last fall were retreated. The project had a late start and then was paused given the BIL funding freeze, so we plan to resume this project next fall.
- We completed a drone flight of lower Chorro Creek (CSLRCD property) to finish up Rincon's mapping of invasive plants in the Chorro Creek watershed. We anticipate hiring the San Luis Obispo County Agriculture Department to treat 20 locations of invasive giant reed (Arundo).

- **Communications, Outreach, & Education Updates:**

- Our 2025 educator workshop series kicked off on January 25th, and we have two more coming up (on February 22 and March 8). A total of 22 educators from all over SLO County were in attendance and learned about topics such as coastal ocean literacy and nature journaling.
- We are gearing up for a busy spring, with lots of events for Earth Month (April) including our annual beach cleanup. We will be hosting Science on Tap at Oak & Otter Brewing in San Luis Obispo on April 24 and participating in the City Nature Challenge (citynaturechallenge.org) during the weekend of April 25 to 28.
- We hosted staff trainings for Camp Ocean Pines naturalists and One Cool Earth garden educators in the past few weeks, sharing information about the estuary and watershed. We have a variety of youth field trips planned for the spring.

11. Adjourn to next meeting of May 21, 2025 at 4 p.m., which will be hybrid with some attendees participating via Zoom and others meeting in the Estuary Program office.

Attachments:

- Minutes from November 20, 2024 EC meeting
- FY25 320 workplan (for reference)
- Rose Foundation 2024 Annual Report (selected pages)
- EPA Approval of the MBNEP's HPRS

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