



**Executive Committee Quarterly Meeting
Estuary Program Offices, Morro Bay, CA
and via Video Conferencing**

**February 18, 2026
4:00 pm**

Minutes

Attendees: Jason Curtis, *Bay Foundation*; Trudy O'Brien, *Morro Bay Commercial Fishermen's Organization*; John Diodati, *Director of Public Works, San Luis Obispo*, Phil Hammer, *Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board*; Becka Kelly, *Morro Bay Harbor Department*; John Flaherty, *Recreation/Tourism seat*; Vivian Lopez, *USEPA*; Ethan Bell, *Fisheries Ecologist, Stillwater Sciences*; Chris Womack, *CSD President of the Board*; Lisen Bonnier, *organic farmer*; Emily Bockmon, *Cal Poly*; Jim Dantona, *SLO County*; Ann Kitajima, *MBNEP Staff*, Jodi Marfia, *MBNEP Staff*

1. Introductions and Updates

- Jason: Bay Foundation successfully hired a new Executive Director .
- Ann: the FY26 Investment and Infrastructure Jobs Act (IIJA) workplan included a \$100,000 subaward with the County's for a fueling canopy project. Due to shifts in funding availability and priorities, the County instead proposed a few new stormwater-related projects that align well with our program goals..
- Jodi: No updates.
- Chris: Los Osos Community Services District CWEL program is nearly operational after years of work; currently resolving turbidity issues.
- Trudy: Central Coast Women for Fisheries annual albacore enchilada event was successful. Commercial crab sales are ongoing and the commercial salmon season is possibly reopening in April after three years of closure. Morro Bay Commercial Fisherman and the Quota Fund contributed significant funds \$450,000 and \$150,000, respectively, to the Harbor Department for infrastructure upgrades. A new marine store – Tabby's Marine – opened in Morro Bay.
- Ethan: Stillwater Sciences is advancing steelhead monitoring and fish passage projects in partnership with Estuary Program and Camp SLO. Working with the City on hydrology modeling for the Morro Creek watershed to prevent flooding, and with the Army Core of Engineers on a final report for an acoustic tagging study of steelhead tied to dredging permits.
- Becka: The Harbor Department is on schedule for entrance dredging May 7 but still awaiting permits for inner harbor dredging – possibly next winter and is exploring sediment reuse strategies with the Estuary Program and other partners as sea level adaptation. Recreational fishing will reopen April 1.
- John Diodati: Director of Public Works for the County, alternate for Kate Ballyntine. South Bay bridge replacement is underway; largest bridge project in County by a large magnitude. Cabrillo Estates may connect to sewer system with grant support and strong community backing. Approaching the Board of Supervisors in next couple of months to pursue seed money to get the project started.
- Phil: Grassy Bar Oyster is exploring a shore-based nursery hatchery with permitting in the early stages; ownership has transferred to Holdfast Aquaculture. Diablo Canyon Power Plant is up for new permits for the first time in over 30 years.
- Lisen: Sediment runoff noted after unusual January warmth and subsequent heavy rains. County again extended its ban on land application of treated sewage sludge/biosolids now with three-year review interval due to ongoing PFAS concerns.
- Emily: Ongoing estuary research includes five-year monitoring proposals, phytoplankton sampling, sea otter behavior research and new tidal prism and radar data efforts with the Estuary Program.

- John Flaherty: The Winter Bird Festival drew record attendance and kayaking/oyster tours continue to expand.
- Jim Dantona: Legislative Assistant and alternate for Bruce Gibson. No updates.
- Vivian: Vivian will soon be going on leave, and Erika Yelensky will attend meetings in her absence.

2. No public comment.

3. Agenda revisions: None

4. **ACTION:** Consider approval of November 19, 2025 Executive Committee (EC) minutes

Vote: Trudy moved to approve. Ethan seconded. All in favor. None opposed.

5. **ACTION:** EC Chair and Vice Chair election

Jason has expressed an interest in being Chair for a second two-year term. Becka is stepping back from the vice chair position, although she will continue to be involved with the committee. Kate Ballantyne expressed interest in the Vice Chair position.

Vote: Ethan moved to approve the slate recommended by staff. Becka seconded. All in favor. None opposed.

6. **DISCUSSION:** Fiscal Year (FY)27 320 workplan

The FY26 IJJA grant application is currently being processed. For FY26 \$850,000 in base funding confirmed. Although we don't yet know the funding amount for FY27, we are assuming level funding of \$850,000. Updates to the 320 workplan include removal of the SOTB sections as it is only done every 3 years and the addition of a task to update the Comprehensive Conservation & Management Plan. IJJA funding is in its final year; base grants have supported core operations while projects were shifted to IJJA funding. Staff are requesting EC input on the FY27 workplan by the end of March. Ethan commented on high quality of Estuary Program staff and how they are instrumental to the success of partnerships and projects that happen.

7. **DISCUSSION:** Program Highlights

Administration:

- FY26 IJJA funding being processed; \$850,000 in 320 base funding confirmed for 2026.

Monitoring:

- New bay-wide eelgrass maps are forthcoming, with expectations of a light drop in acreage to more sustainable levels.
- Cal Poly developing machine learning tools to automate eelgrass classification.
- Wildlife cameras captured diverse species, including a bear, mountain lions, and bobcats.

Restoration:

- Ongoing sea level rise adaptation project with USGS, technical advisory meetings, hydrodynamic modeling and initial results indicating local marsh resilience, but eventual risk of marsh conversion to mudflats, although this is farther out now than once predicted.
- On Walters Creek, our program and partners installed 40 low-tech process-based restoration structures to mimic beaver dams for support groundwater recharge, sediment capture, and habitat improvement. Some were lost in the storms of late 2025 but more are planned in spring with adaptive management.
- Historical ecology study nearing completion, focusing on pre-development habitat conditions to inform future restoration.

Education & Outreach:

- Teacher training series continues in partnership with Cal Poly, reaching local educators
 - Two new Nature Center exhibits in design.
 - Communications efforts include high social media engagement, multiple newsletters/blogs, and a recently released State of the Bay report with supporting website data dashboard.
8. Adjourn to next meeting of May 20, 2026 at 4 p.m., which will be hybrid with attendance via Zoom or meeting in the Estuary Program office.

Vote: Becka moved to adjourn, Trudy seconded. All in favor.