



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

**August 19, 2026
4:00 pm**

Minutes

Attendees: Jason Curtis, *Bay Foundation*; Becka Kelly, *Morro Bay Harbor Department*; Trudy O'Brien, *Morro Bay Commercial Fishermen's Organization*; Jim Dantona, *County SLO Board of Supervisors*; Ethan Bell, *Stillwater Sciences*; Emily Bockmon, *Cal Poly*; Zara Landrum, *City Council Member*; Lisen Bonnier, *Organic Farmer*; John Flaherty, *Central Coast Outdoors*; Erica Yelensky, *EPA*, Ann Kitajima, *MBNEP staff*; Sara Soroka, *MBNEP staff*.

1. Introductions and Updates

- Jason: No updates from the Bay Foundation.
- Becca: The Harbor Department is exploring reinstating the Clean Marina Program certification program, in coordination with Associated Marine Industries. The eelgrass management plan is under development for the 2027 Army Corps dredging project scheduled for early spring; Merkel & Associates has identified a mitigation need and is evaluating sites, including deepening the area across from the yacht club to support eelgrass.
- Trudy: This is the first salmon season in three years, and it is going well, with one additional opener planned since the season's catch limit has not been reached. The new Chitqawi Marine Protected Area (MPA) has been proposed for the area. There were potential issues with a lack of public notification. A recent virtual meeting format has limited participation from remote attendees, and no Central Coast fishermen were heard at this month's Fish and Game Commission meeting. A final decision is expected in Sacramento in October.
- Jim: The count is coordinating with emergency services and public works to prepare for the upcoming El Niño storms, with a focus on creeks, runoff, and flooding.
- Ethan: Stillwater Sciences has been working with the City of Morro Bay to finalize the Chorro Creek watershed model, which predicts flood inundation levels and evaluates flood-reduction alternatives. They are pursuing Coastal San Luis Resource Conservation District permits for work in the lower Chorro Creek watershed projects to reduce flooding and enhance habitat for sensitive species. This fall they will be working with MBNEP in the Chorro Creek subwatershed to monitor steelhead populations through juvenile tagging, movement tracking, and pikeminnow population management. A forthcoming publication with MBNEP will examine watershed challenges and outreach to the broader scientific community. Steelhead tracking work in the estuary was funded by the Army Corps of Engineers as part of its dredging permit process to assess steelhead impacts. Partners are awaiting the results of the effort.
- Emily: Kevin Johnson will serve as the new alternate. Emily and other Cal Poly faculty received new funding from the Santa Rosa Creek Foundation to support bay monitoring of oysters,

phytoplankton, otters, and more. She is preparing monitoring efforts for El Niño and examining freshwater influences on the bay.

- Zara: Attended the Water Resources Advisory Council meeting on the proposed desalination plant. The site list has narrowed to five locations, with Morro Bay among the leading candidates. Noted that the glyphosate use will be considered by the City Council before year-end.
- Lisen: Harvest was limited due to the warm winter. Commercial growers report mixed results, with avocados performing well, while cherries, plums, pears, and citrus faced more difficulty. Summer crops are doing fine, and growers are preparing for potential El Niño impacts. Seed orders are running low, as early planting may help stabilize soil ahead of a predicted wet winter.
- John: Summer tourist season went well, rebounding from last year's decline in visitation. Oyster farm tours (both private and public) have generated strong interest, and the farm-to-table theme has helped integrate bay health messaging into tours. The latest otter count was 88, which is one of the highest on record, and tourists have shown particular interest in otters.
- Erica: Covering for Vivian and working with MBNEP since late spring, following a long tenure with Santa Monica NEP.

2. No public comment.

3. Agenda Revisions: May EC minutes approval was inadvertently left off the agenda. Consider minutes for approval..

3b. ACTION: Consider approval of Executive Committee meeting minutes from May 20, 2026

Vote: Jim moved to approve, Ethan seconded. Motion carried. Lisen, Zara, and Emily abstained.

4. **DISCUSSION:** Community Project update

The recently completed project for 2026 involved a workshop and field tours to share information on beaver dams analogs and other low-tech process-based restoration techniques. These types of projects recharge groundwater, increase creek surface flows, and improve riparian corridor health. A March workshop drew 58 participants, including agency staff, landowners, and community members. This was followed by six site tours in spring with 41 participants on Walters Creek.

Looking ahead to 2027, two candidate projects will be reviewed and voted on at the November EC meeting: (1) a tree-planting project with EcoSLO at El Chorro Regional Park, which currently has lacks trees. The project is in collaboration with SLO County Parks and includes EcoSLO monitoring planting success; and (2) creation of naturalist kits for families to check out from the local library.

5. **DISCUSSION:** State of the Bay impact

Every three years, the Estuary Program creates a State of the Bay report that addressing common questions about the estuary and watershed. The effort involves a series of events to share the report results.. For our 2026 State of the Bay effort, we distributed 600 physical reports, had 450 views of the online report, held 11 events that reached about 900 people, and had 400 visits to the online data dashboard.

Zara expressed interest in a State of the Bay presentation to City Council. Emily noted she has used and values the data dashboard. Ethan highlighted the science night event as a favorite.

6. **DISCUSSION:** Eelgrass draft map

The current eelgrass map, based on data collected in spring 2025, is being developed by Merkel & Associates, who committed to a final map by end of September. An area of eelgrass loss has been identified, theorized to result from higher elevation trapping water at low tide and raising water temperatures. There is no evidence of large-scale die-off, and only a slight acreage decline is anticipated relative to the 2023 map.

Zara asked about the specific extent of the decline; the exact figure won't be known until the final map is complete. Jason asked about methodology, which remains consistent with the previous eelgrass mapping effort. Emily asked about mapping frequency. Surveys were conducted in 2023 and 2025, with a target of every other year. However, sonar and drone methods are expensive, and as BIL funding runs out, the program may rely more on Cal Poly drone imagery. Ethan asked when the data would be available. The final map is expected by end of September and will be shared with the community via public-friendly maps, GIS layers, and other formats.

7. **DISCUSSION:** Comprehensive Conservation & Management Plan update

The management plan is updated every decade, with a minor update completed in 2022 and a major overhaul due in 2028. Review is underway to identify needed adjustments to the 48 current action plans, including how climate change language will need to shift. The EPA has also requested tracking of action plan progress via a data dashboard, to be developed in the 2028 to 2029 timeframe.

8. **DISCUSSION:** Program Highlights

Administration:

- Hiring a new Education & Outreach Manager. Erica Yelensky, our EPA Project Officer, will visit next week.

Monitoring

- Held a successful field day with college students.

Restoration

- Completed the historical ecology report with SFEI. Public-friendly story maps based on the report will be posted to the website soon.

Education & Outreach

- Completed numerous summer field trips, with attendance driven largely by tourists. Exploring ways to increase attendance and reduce late drop-outs in the future.

Jim asked about trash levels around July 4th. This year's cleanup collected less trash than in prior years.

9. Adjourn to next meeting of November 18, 2026 at 4 p.m., which will be hybrid with attendance via Zoom or meeting in the Estuary Program office.

Vote: Ethan moved to adjourn at 4:58pm, Jim seconded. All in favor.