



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

**May 15, 2024  
4:00 pm**

### **Minutes**

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**Attendees:** Ethan Bell, *Stillwater Sciences*; Phil Hammer, *Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board*; Becka Kelly, *Morro Bay Harbor Department*; John Flaherty, *Recreation/Tourism seat*; Marshall Ochylski, *Los Osos CSD*; Kate Ballantyne, *SLO County Public Works*; Blake Fixler, *SLO County*; Zara Landrum, *City of Morro Bay*; Lisen Bonnier, *Ag interests seat*; Jeremiah O'Brien, *Commercial fishing seat*; Suzanne Marr, *USEPA*; Vivian Lopez, *USEPA*; Ann Kitajima, *MBNEP Staff*; Melodie Grubbs, *MBNEP Staff*.

#### **1. Introductions and Updates**

- Becka: Acting as vice chair today in Jason's absence. Might have to run out if needed by the Harbor Department. The dredge Yaquina is in town for next 18 days, working the harbor entrance area back to the North T-pier. They are going to be doing a little bit more dredging than anticipated in their original plan. It's expected that there will be some eelgrass mitigation required as they might need to dredge near the sandspit where it's too shallow. The Ironman race is this weekend with 2,000 athletes participating. They will be swimming in the bay and running and cycling around the area. There are upcoming changes in structure at the Harbor Department as the current Harbor Director will be leaving at beginning of July. They are not dredging back to Tidelands Park this year. Next year the dredge project is expected to extend back to about channel marker 17 and 18.
- Ethan: Stillwater Sciences was out in the bay last week for bay fish monitoring and eDNA monitoring. They were monitoring fish inside and outside of eelgrass beds. While the data has not yet been analyzed, they saw a strong diversity of fish, especially in the eelgrass. The work went well and they will be writing up analysis soon. Next week they will be in Chorro Creek recapturing steelhead juveniles, looking for fish tagged in the fall to measure growth rates and note their location. They will do pikeminnow management at the same time.
- Phil: Two updates related to the watershed. The State Board issued a permit to a wind farm to do some geotech surveys. It's very minor work as far as impacts. Also, Camp SLO did a lot of unauthorized work in a tributary to Chorro Creek. They did not get permits for the work. Steelhead fry and California red-legged frog were impacted. They also removed vegetation. They had biologists out there, so unsure why the consultant didn't say something. Water Board will be going out to do inspections.
- Jeremiah: Fisherman are working hard on things other than fishing. There are ongoing lawsuits with various wind groups and other organizations in the state.
- Zara: The Morro Bay city council is dealing with the Vistra draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR). The issue of wind farms comes up frequently as residents are concerned about impacts to the estuary and marine life, in particular because there is interest in using Morro Bay as an operations maintenance base. It would be great to have feedback from us. Mel said she's met with various groups concerned about it. The timing of our role is when EIR documents or designs are released so we can see what the tangible effects might be, could suggest things like a more robust sea-level rise study, etc. The draft EIR comment review period ends soon, and it doesn't seem like the estuary was addressed in the studies.
- Marshall: The Los Osos Community Services District (LOCSO) is operating as usual. Zara heard that Los Osos is trying to get water from the state or from Morro Bay. The cost would be \$40-\$50M. Marshall answered that they are looking at various options right now, including tapping into state water from SLO. Under the Los Osos Community Plan going to Coastal Commission now, there would be 1% growth allowed.
- Vivian Lopez: New EPA project manager. Was in Superfund before joining the water division. Before that she was a contractor on Superfund projects and a staff researcher at UC Cooperative Extension in Merced with degrees in biology and environmental systems.

- Suzanne: Thanked everyone for doing such great work in Morro Bay. Thanks for being welcoming and understanding of challenges of working with EPA. Thanks to the program for being the best grantees ever. Mel also presented to the Water Division (WQ, NPDES, etc.) at the regional offices, and they were all impressed with all the work we're doing.
- Mel: Mel went up to Reg 9 to meet with EPA related to the transition. This morning staff presented on our program to get Vivian oriented. Erica Yellenski is still around and will be a good resource for Vivian.
- John: Rec/tourism chair. Not much to report. Upcoming triathlon is a big upcoming event.
- Kate: County Public Works. An estuary adjacent issue is the County's regional desalination efforts. They received a federal grant from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation for \$548k to start looking at the process, criteria, etc. for desalination technology somewhere in the county. It's a 20-year effort that is kicking off now. Anticipate that the Estuary Program will be a stakeholder in the public engagement process.
- Blake: Contacted by Estuary Program staff re: encampments on Turri Rd by Los Osos Creek where trash and other pollutants were ending up in the creek. It's been heavily reduced, but not 100% cleaned up by the County and State Parks in a joint effort earlier this month. Also, the Los Osos Community Plan is going forward. Coastal Commission will consider it at their June hearing. If approved, it could end a building moratorium that's 40 years old. The county is expecting suggested modifications to the proposed plan but likely nothing too difficult to address, mostly just working with the water purveyors.
- Lisen: Ag chair. Had a wet winter but not as wet as 2023. Farmers were pre-warned after the 2023 winter that might be a wet year. Several farmers planted ahead of time, left soil undisturbed, or put in cover crops in wet areas. Expecting to see less erosion this year than last year.
- Ann: There is a Rose Foundation grant opportunity for nonprofits, municipalities, universities, etc. called the Central Coast Community-Based Water Quality grant. The award amount is \$20k to \$200k. Please reach out if you'd like more information.
- The group began a discussion of dredging in the bay. Jeremiah was wondering about steelhead in the bay and if they were impacting dredging activities. The Estuary Program is working with Stillwater Sciences to sample steelhead in Chorro Creek and have seen the juveniles move into the lower watershed in the winter (January to April), presumably to leave the watershed and enter the bay. We didn't have information on the status of the Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) permitting of the dredging. Zara talked with the ACOE when she was in DC, who told her that steelhead were begin tagged in the bay. She was also told that there was funding for dredging but that it was held up by a lack of information about steelhead. The Estuary Program would be meeting the next day with the ACOE and would share any updates with the group. Ethan shared that he met with the ACOE, and their study plan was temporal and spatial because they wanted to dredge back to State Park Marina (SPM). They wanted to know if there were steelhead in the SPM area, and Ethan said there is no data available to answer that question. We know steelhead are in that area in the spring since that's when the fish are leaving Chorro Creek. The lead permitting biologist at the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is not aware of what ACOE is planning, but no work can be done without a NMFS permit. There was some discussion of dredge materials management. It's a multi-regulatory agency process. Phil said he would connect us with the ACOE point of contact. In discussing the dredging of SPM, Becka stated that the last time studies were done it was determined that the dredge materials needed to be trucked to Arizona and were not suitable to be put at the designated disposal site.

2. Public Comment

None.

3. Agenda Revisions

None.

4. **ACTION:** Consider Approval of February 21, 2024 EC meeting minutes (see attached)

**Vote:** Jeremiah motioned to approve. Ethan seconded. All in favor. None opposed.

5. **ACTION:** Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 320 workplan approval (see attached)

Staff presented the budget and workplan tasks for FY 2025 for the 320 grant. Becka commented that she particularly liked the marine litter reduction efforts.

**Vote:** Marshall moved to approve the workplan. Lisen seconded. All in favor. None opposed.

6. **DISCUSSION:** FY24 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and 320 semi-annual reports (see attached)

Staff presented the BIL and 320 semi-annual reports that summarize the spending and work conducted in the previous six-month period.

7. **DISCUSSION:** EPA and Association of National Estuary Program (ANEP) updates

Suzanne Marr is retiring at the end of May. Vivian Lopez is coming on board as the EPA project manager for the Estuary Program.

Mel went to Washington, D.C. for a week in late April for the spring ANEP meeting. It was a busy trip. The directors usually go in March at the time of appropriations to have meetings on the Hill. This year was different. EPA set up the meeting and scheduled it for late April. A subset of ANEP members met with appropriations committees. ANEP circulated a Dear Colleague letter to the House/Senate asking them to fully fund the NEPs up to their authorized amount of \$1M. It is still circulating through the House but already has a dozen more signatures than last year with lots of bipartisan support. ANEP talked about potential Administration changes and what that might mean. Being a grant program, funding is usually allocated ahead of time, so we have money for this upcoming FY. Delays would give us problems next year when creating the workplan and budget for FY26.

8. **DISCUSSION:** Program Highlights

- **Community Projects Updates:** Staff present the status of the ongoing Community Project with One Cool Earth.
- **Monitoring Updates:** Staff described the ongoing creek monitoring and the results of the 2023 eelgrass mapping effort.
- **Restoration Updates:** Staff gave a status update on a riparian mapping project in Chorro Creek and an upcoming Restore America's Estuaries Coastal Watersheds Grant to address vulnerability and adaptation strategies for Morro Bay's marshes.
- **Education & Outreach Updates:** Staff gave updates on the conclusion of teacher trainings for the year and on outreach events throughout the spring.

9. Adjourned at 5:25 p.m. to the next meeting of August 21, 2024 at 4:00 p.m., to be held via Zoom and in the Morro Bay offices.