



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

**November 20, 2024  
4:00 pm**

**Minutes**

**Attendees:** Jason Curtis, *Bay Foundation*; Trudy O'Brien, *Morro Bay Commercial Fishermen's Organization*; Ethan Bell, *Stillwater Sciences*; Phil Hammer, *Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board*; Becka Kelly, *Morro Bay Harbor Department*; John Flaherty, *Recreation/Tourism seat*; Vivian Lopez, *USEPA*; Lisen Bonnier, *Organic Farmer*; Ann Kitajima, *MBNEP Staff*; Melodie Grubbs, *MBNEP Staff*; Jodi Marfia, *MBNEP Staff*

**1. Introductions and Updates**

- Ethan Bell: Environmental seat representative. In a project with the Estuary Program, Stillwater Sciences staff tagged hundreds of steelhead this fall, and the stationary antenna are up and running. As rain is expected this weekend, we'll see how the fish respond. They completed sampling of the estuary for fish population composition sampling and analysis, and a draft report has gone to the Estuary Program. They are analyzing how fish populations responded to the lack of eelgrass and subsequent regeneration of eelgrass. After eelgrass recovery, we saw more of the habitat specialist species like pipe fish. During the time periods with little eelgrass, this species was not present. Stillwater is preparing to possibly work with the Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) on steelhead movement through the bay to better understand possible impacts from dredging. They will keep us and the Harbor Patrol informed of the status.
- Trudy O'Brien: Commercial fishing representative. No local updates from the fishing community.
- Becka Kelly: The Harbor Department was awarded an additional \$38,000 for derelict boat removal from the Division of Boating and Waterways. These were excess funds another harbor did not use, and work should be happening this winter. Removal of the boats is very detrimental to the boat ramp due to how they are removed. Emergency repairs are to be made on the ramp, and the hope is to replace/lengthen the ramp in the future. The annual harbor dredging project is planned for May, and next winter the entire channel will be done as well. The New Harbor Vitality Head will be starting December 2. Chris Munson from Port San Luis has accepted the position.
- John Flaherty: Tourism/recreation representative. The recent local Morro Bay triathlon went well, and the tides cooperated for the event. The Winter Bird Festival is coming in January, and they are anticipating record breaking attendance as many events sold out in 24 hours.
- Lisen Bonnier: Agricultural representative. The county's agricultural report for 2023 came out and strawberries were the top crop and grapes were second, although there isn't a lot of either of these in our watershed. A grower on Los Osos Valley Road recently added grapes, so we'll see how they do. All eyes are on the rain coming in to see how crops are affected. Just hoping that this rain that sets off the pastures will have some more rain following it.
- Phil Hammer: Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board (CCRWQCB). The Water Board issued a permit mid-September to Harbor Hut to do some property upgrades. They are talking with a second leaseholder for a potential wind project for the exploratory geotechnical work. There's no permit yet. The impacts on the bay would be minor as the work would be in Estero Bay. The Board recently adopted an additional beneficial uses for subsistence fishing, which is new for the region.
- Vivian Lopez: EPA. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) award for Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 expected to come in soon. We're hoping for an award early next year.
- Jason Curtis: Works at Cuesta College but representing the Bay Foundation as Vice President of the board.
- Melodie Grubbs: Updates to come later in meeting.
- Ann Kitajima: Updates to come later in meeting.

- Jodi Marfia: No updates.

## 2. Public Comment

None.

## 3. Agenda Revisions

None.

- ## 4. ACTION: Approval of meeting minutes from August 21, 2024 Executive Committee (EC) meeting (see attached)

**Vote:** Ethan motioned to approve the minutes as presented. Jason seconded. All in favor. None opposed.

## 5. ACTION: Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) Workplan and Budget for FY2025 (see attached)

Mel provided an update on the BIL workplan and budget for funding and approval. In addition to ongoing restoration and monitoring efforts, there is a focus on education and outreach to build the program back up post-Covid. Ethan commented that he appreciated the mix of work in the plan which included an increase of staff that's needed to get projects done and a nice mix of projects that reflect the Estuary Program overall.

**Vote:** Becka made the motion to approve FY2025 BIL workplan and budget. Ethan seconded. All in favor. None opposed.

## 6. DISCUSSION: Semi-annual Reports for 320 and BIL (see attached)

The semi-annual reports for BIL and the 320 funding describe the work we did during the past six months as well as the overall spending. For the 320 grant, we've used 85% of the funding received since the start of the five-year grant cycle and met 225% of our match requirement with \$5 million in match so far. For BIL, we have used about half of the funding, and there is no match requirement on BIL. Phil asked about sources of match, and Ann described the cash and in-kind match that comes from partner work, volunteer time, etc. Jason asked why we were so far expended in 320 at this point in the year, and Mel clarified it only included the funding that we have access to now, not the funding expected in the remaining years of the five-year grant cycle. Ethan asked if we were more limited by funding or ideas (i.e., more programs than money or vice versa). Mel says we now have more ideas than funding so we're trying to be more strategic on what we fund now with an eye to alternative funding to continue our work after BIL is concluded.

## 7. DISCUSSION: Program Highlights

- **Community Projects Updates:** The One Cool Earth garden outdoor education program at Baywood Elementary has wrapped up. The current project is with California State Parks. Their MPA activity guide has been reprinted and delivered to State Parks. Their staff have begun distributing it throughout the district and will report when the project is complete in a year.
- **Monitoring Updates:** Staff described ongoing monitoring. The 2024 bioassessment results are in. The bugs found tell us about water quality in the creeks. The 2023 scores were disappointingly low, likely due to high winter flows that washed away the bugs. We're pleased to see that the 2024 scores are excellent. Possibly sediment was washed away in the 2023 high flows, leaving behind better habitat for the bugs. Our program collects data to support the Water Board's Integrated Report process. The

submittal deadline was in late October and we submitted data through August. Planning is underway for a baywide eelgrass map to be done in 2025. We are expecting a slight reduction of acreage. The mapping data will be collected in the April/May/June timeframe and takes about a year to compile the map. Lisen asked how dredging will affect the project. Ann explained that the sonar part of work may be impacted and that we will work the schedule around the dredging to minimize any impacts. The ACOE will map the area before and after the dredge, and any lost eelgrass would have to be mitigated. Phil asked about extreme swings in acreage results and asked what a healthy amount of eelgrass is in the bay. While it's hard to say for sure, the 2023 map indicated the highest acreage we've ever mapped, and given the high elevations where eelgrass was found, the current acreage is likely not sustainable. But it's hard to know what exactly is a stable amount for our bay.

- **Restoration Updates:** Our USGS sea level modeling and planning project is ongoing. A Restore America's Estuaries grant was recently awarded to support the effort. Planning for the fish barrier removal project is ongoing, with hydrology studies completed for two alternatives. Work continues on ice plant removal from the sandspit.
- **Education & Outreach Updates:** Staff gave updates on the summer outreach activities, which were very successful.

John asked about dead ice plant, expressed concern that some is coming back, and asked for clarification on what it looked like moving forward for permanent eradication. Mel said it is a multi-year project that will continue. Some of it was very dense so it's not surprising that it is coming back. We are working on logistics to go back out and re-treat the ice plant and spot treat regrowth. Trudy asked what the actual treatment method is, and Mel mentioned a number of methods, including a low concentration of glyphosphate at a 2 to 4% concentration. We have been having conversations recently with the city on the use of glyphosphate. Our project is permitted through the US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) for sensitive habitat, permitted by the State Coastal Commission, and approved by the city of Morro Bay. Our approach included judicious use of herbicides as well as hand-pulling around sensitive species and around the water's edge.

Ethan asked about the historical ecology project and whether there was a technical advisory committee for it. He will contact Carolyn for more information. On the San Luisito Creek fish barrier project planning, he asked about the status of the effort. We are currently in the conceptual planning phase and there is currently no funding for implementation. There are concerns that opening up the barriers would allow pikeminnow to travel farther up the tributary creeks. Mel said there are utilities under the restoration site that would impact costs.

Phil asked about the timing of the historical ecology study with the submittal of the Habitat Protection and Restoration Strategy (HPRS), given that the former could shape what is contained in the HPRS. Mel said we'd been working on our HPRS for a while and wanted to get it out before EPA issued new guidance to the NEPs that might necessitate further changes to the document. Thus we could not wait for the historical ecology effort to be completed before submitting the HPRS. The CSLRCD is currently compiling a high resolution vegetation set, and once that's done we'll update the HPRS habitat maps.

Mel gave an update on the Association National Estuary Programs (ANEP) conference in New York. The upcoming administration change was a big topic of discussion. The NEPs remain confident that we have strong bipartisan support at the national level and that funding should remain intact. The goal is to maintain funding levels. The next effort is pursuing reauthorization. She will have more information on this after the spring ANEP meeting in D.C.

Becka asked date of January Science Explorations event in Los Osos. It will be January 15.

8. Adjourned at 4:59 p.m. to the next meeting of February 19, 2024 at 4:00 p.m., to be held via Zoom and in the Morro Bay offices.

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