



## OFFICE OF WETLANDS, OCEANS AND WATERSHEDS

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20460

September 27, 2024

Mr. Tom Ford  
Director  
Santa Monica Bay National Estuary Program  
8117 W. Manchester Ave. #750  
Playa Del Rey, California 90293

Dear Mr. Ford:

Thank you and The Bay Foundation and Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission staff, and your many partners, for contributing to a successful 2024 Program Evaluation process. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recognizes that everyone involved put considerable effort into both the PE package and the responses to follow-up questions. We also appreciate your facilitation of the site visits enabling the PE team of Vince Bacalan (EPA Headquarters), Erica Yelensky (EPA Region 9) and Joyce Novak (Peconic Estuary Partnership) to meet the staff, visit projects and engage with partners in your study area. Below, you will find the results of the Environmental Protection Agency's 2024 Program Evaluation for the review period from October 1, 2018, to September 30, 2023.

I would like to note that your evaluation benefited from the voluntary participation of Dr. Joyce Novak, who served in an ex-officio capacity on the PE team. Dr. Novak's participation provided the PE team members with an invaluable local National Estuary Program perspective. Dr. Novak also shared thoughtful insights about the Peconic Estuary Partnership that may be useful for your program and took several lessons learned back to her organization.

The primary purpose of the EPA Program Evaluation process is to help the EPA determine whether each of the 28 programs included in the National Estuary Program is making adequate progress implementing their Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plans. The evaluation process has considerably enhanced the EPA headquarters and regional knowledge of each local NEP and promoted sharing of innovative projects and approaches across all 28 local NEPs. In addition, the EPA uses the evaluation process to assess how the local NEPs support Clean Water Act programs and to demonstrate the extent of the local NEPs' contributions to the EPA 2022-2026 Strategic Plan Goal 5: Ensure Clean and Safe Water for All Communities, Objective 5.2, Protect and Restore Waterbodies and Watersheds.

The PE process uses a two-category determination of proficient or progressing. *Proficient* means a local NEP is adequately meeting programmatic and environmental results. A *progressing* determination means the local NEP is missing or underperforming with respect to the criteria as defined in the 2023 Program Evaluation Guidance. A *progressing* determination will prompt a timeline to address those missing elements or opportunities for improvement before the next PE cycle. This determination is informed by the entire PE package (narrative submission from the local NEP, NEPORT data, annual work plans and the EPA required annual end of year reports), on-site visit and through discussions with the local NEP.

**The EPA has concluded that the Santa Monica Bay NEP continues to make significant progress in implementing its CCMP and has rated the SMBNEP as *proficient* in the 2024 Program Evaluation.**

### **2024 Program Evaluation Findings**

The following summary highlights the PE team’s key findings for the Santa Monica Bay NEP by identifying: (I) progress made in the areas highlighted in the 2019 Program Evaluation, (II) strengths and (III) opportunities for improvement. This summary recognizes the program’s successes and recommends efforts to further strengthen the program. The SMBNEP’s response to these recommendations will be evaluated in the next PE cycle.

#### **I. Progress made in the areas highlighted in the 2019 Program Evaluation**

*2019 challenge: Continue updating governance structure and process.*

The Commission’s Memorandum of Understanding, amended in June 2020, clarified the SMBNEP’s two-entity structure operating as a collaborative unit; the role and functions of committees that make up the SMBNEP Management Conference; and various processes around decision-making. In February 2024, the MOU was further updated to incorporate increased community engagement and Tribal engagement. In addition, the Memorandum of Agreement was updated in 2020 to better articulate the relationship between the SMBNEP Management Conference (Commission) and the host entity (The Bay Foundation) as the Clean Water Act section 320 grant recipient. The document also described the responsibilities of each entity in detail to ensure successful implementation of the CCMP and delivery of NEP-related products such as annual workplans.

*2019 challenge: Communicate the NEP brand and successes to external audiences.*

The SMBNEP established its new [website](#) in response to the updated organizational structure identified in the previous challenge. This unified website now houses various documents specific to SMBNEP, allowing greater ease and availability of relevant information not only for the Management Conference but to the public as well. As a parallel effort, SMBNEP created a new logo not only to enhance its branding and messaging but also to promote its profile and expand its reach in the watershed. These enhancements amplify the current methods of communicating the local NEP’s progress and successes via digital, traditional and social media. Together, the unified website and logo also provide unique opportunities to showcase SMBNEP’s and partners’ work as Los Angeles prepares to host the next Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2028.

## **II. Strengths**

### *NEP Environmental Programmatic Workplan Accomplishments: **Healthy ecosystem***

We commend the SMBNEP for developing its current CCMP Action Plan around long-term environmental goals that are both specific and measurable. The robust nature of the science-based decision-making and the resulting quantifiable data driven metrics for success allow the SMBNEP to stand strong as a trusted partner in the watershed.

Staff and partners are commended for their habitat restoration successes with artificial rocky reef establishment, abalone outplanting, and sea grass restoration. Having quantifiable metrics in place translates to greater transparency and more accountability when describing progress and milestones accomplished and builds trust in the community. For example, restoration targets for habitat projects are informed by the best available science and implemented using sound research techniques. Of particular note is The Bay Foundation receiving NOAA's ['Partner in the Spotlight'](#) award in 2023 . It recognizes not only the multiple white abalone outplanting events since 2018 but more importantly the establishment of safe protocols for maintaining uninterrupted life support and husbandry practices during the COVID health emergency. We acknowledge the strong dedication of TBF staff and partners for their unwavering commitment to this important work.

### *NEP Ecosystem and Community Status: **Support of the EPA priorities***

One of many highlights during a site visit is seeing projects described in the narrative report directly and interacting with individuals involved and impacted by the work firsthand. The first example is an EPA-funded Environmental Justice small grant to The Bay Foundation in partnership with the Environmental Charter Middle School in Inglewood to build garden beds to benefit community health and social equity as well as promote solutions to food access, climate change and air pollution. The partnership between the school and The Bay Foundation is a testament to the power of the NEP model and what is possible when well-developed programs join forces with dedicated and knowledgeable staff in leveraging the EPA funds toward underserved communities. This ongoing partnership with the school will have positive results into the future.

Additionally, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funds are currently invested through The Bay Foundation in the Black Surfers Collective whose mission is to provide equitable access to the coast, surfing lessons, and other water-based activities. Access to water is a key component of equity strategies and builds long-term love for and stewardship of our coastlines.

Finally, we would like to note The Bay Foundation's partnership with local restaurants in underserved communities to reduce single-use disposable plastics and replace them with durable multi-use materials in support of the City of Los Angeles's initiative to reduce plastic pollution in communities and its impacts along coastal waters.

### **III. Opportunities for improvement**

***NEP Administration and Governance Structure: Explore programmatic efficiencies while maintaining operational effectiveness.***

The sixty-six public meetings planned and held during this past evaluation period translate to an average of 200 hours per person in attendance, not including time for preparation and follow-ups. The length of annual workplans has been an ongoing discussion and was also raised during the site visit. The PE team believes that there is an opportunity for the SMBNEP to operate more efficiently and reduce the burden on staff and Management Conference members without sacrificing the effectiveness of the Program. Many local NEPs have found ways to address the administrative burden issue by conducting meetings on a quarterly basis. In the case of Peconic Estuary, for example, the Management Committee meets up to four times annually to maximize participation during busy periods; interim meetings with Committee leadership takes place in advance of meetings and on an as-needed basis. Annual workplans can be streamlined; some programs have existing online content and use the workplan to redirect introductory information repeated each year to their website. Utilizing web-based tools for more timely reporting of monitoring data is another consideration, something that SMBNEP is exploring with its State of the Bay metrics.

It is essential that the SMBNEP find programmatic efficiencies as this will only enhance the ability of staff to more effectively implement priorities and projects. In the coming years, additional reporting associated with the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Justice40 initiatives will increase; the Executive Director and his staff will need increased time to provide reports and work efficiently to see the SMBNEP mission realized into the future. As the SMBNEP embarks on updating its CCMP, an operational assessment and review of program office capacity would also be beneficial.

***Education and Outreach: Improved storytelling of progress and successes***

As previously highlighted in Section I, the SMBNEP has better positioned itself as an effective organization to address climate resiliency, restoration and equity in the watershed with a unified website and logo. However, there were several instances in the submitted narrative report where milestones could have been more explicitly described as successes.

The PE team recommends that the SMBNEP consider a more holistic approach to messaging its successes to a diverse audience. The team is aware that an improved tracking of progress is anticipated to become part of the next iteration of the CCMP. Doing so reinforces how milestones support long-term environmental goals, enhance transparency by reporting out to the public and the EPA on accomplishments and inform adaptive management based on lessons learned. Finding an approach that strikes a balance between data-heavy versus graphics-based will be a challenge and may require the assistance of a dedicated communications staff to properly address this need.

Thank you again for participating in the program evaluation process. We welcome any thoughts you may have about the evaluation process itself or the EPA's involvement in the implementation of the Santa Monica Bay NEP's CCMP. If you have any questions or comments, please contact me at 202-564-3169 or at [barger.cindy@epa.gov](mailto:barger.cindy@epa.gov), or Vince Bacalan at 202-566-0930 or at [bacalan.vince@epa.gov](mailto:bacalan.vince@epa.gov).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Cindy Barger". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Cindy" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Barger".

Cindy Barger

Chief, Partnership Programs Branch

cc:

Brian Frazer, EPA Headquarters, Director, Office of Wetlands, Oceans and Watersheds

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