



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20460

DEC 06 2019

OFFICE OF WATER

Mr. Tom Ford, Executive Director  
Santa Monica Bay National Estuary Program  
8334 Lincoln Blvd. #310  
Los Angeles, CA 90045

Dear Mr. Ford,

The purpose of this letter is to provide the results of the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) 2019 Program Evaluation (PE) and to thank you and the Santa Monica Bay National Estuary Program (SMBNEP) staff, as well as your partners, for contributing to the 2019 PE process. We recognize that you put considerable effort into both the PE package and the responses to our follow-up questions. We also appreciate your facilitation of the PE Review Team's site visit that enabled the Review Team to meet your staff and visit projects in your study area.

I would like to note that your evaluation benefited from the voluntary participation of Jennifer Hecker, Executive Director of the Coastal and Heartland National Estuary Partnership, who served in an ex-officio capacity on the PE Review Team. Ms. Hecker's participation provided the Team with an invaluable National Estuary Program (NEP) perspective. Such peer-to-peer information sharing is vital to both programs.

The primary purpose of the EPA Program Evaluation process is to help EPA determine whether the 28 programs included in the NEP are making adequate progress implementing their Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plans (CCMPs). The evaluation process has considerably enhanced EPA Headquarters and Regional staff knowledge of each individual NEP and promoted sharing of innovative projects and approaches across all 28 NEPs. In addition, EPA uses the evaluation process to assess how the NEPs support Clean Water Act (CWA) core programs and to evaluate the extent and effectiveness of the NEPs' contributions to achievement of EPA 2016 - 2020 Strategic Plan goal--Goal 2: Protecting America's Waters, Objective 2.1, Protect Human Health and Objective 2.2, Protect and Restore Watersheds and Aquatic Ecosystems.

Based on the PE Review Team's findings, we believe your Program continues to make significant progress in implementing the SMBNEP's CCMP. We were impressed by the work your team has accomplished in a wide range of project types and the partnerships you have successfully fostered with a host of community and agency partners. EPA has determined the SMBNEP has passed the 2019 PE and is eligible for further funding authorized by CWA §320.

### 2019 Program Evaluation Findings

The 2019 PE key findings are divided into four categories: (I) Progress made to address the challenges identified in the 2014 Program Evaluation, (II) Support of CWA Core Programs, (III) Strengths, and (IV) Challenges. This summary is intended both to recognize SMBNEP's successes and to recommend efforts to further strengthen the Program. SMBNEP's response to these recommendations will be evaluated in the next PE cycle in 5 years.

## **I. Progress made to address the challenges identified in the 2014 Program Evaluation**

The following section excerpts recommendations from EPA's 2014 Program Evaluation (italicized text below) and describes how SMBNEP addressed them.

### **A. Financial Management Recommendation:**

*Continue to explore new funding mechanisms and opportunities.*

SMBNEP has consistently met and exceeded its CWA §320 non-federal match obligations through State bond funds, grants, and contracts, as well as private and corporate donations, totaling over \$9 million annually for CCMP implementation. These funds came from diverse entities, often on a multi-year basis. Examples of projects implemented with these funds included long-term monitoring of Malibu Lagoon (State Parks); abalone restoration (NOAA); living shoreline projects (Coastal Conservancy); Ballona Wetlands Community-Based Restoration efforts (NFWF); and rain gardens and Low Impact Development (Metropolitan Water District). Altogether, SMBNEP leveraged an average of \$29:1 in relation to its CWA §320 funding allocation over the last five years. SMBNEP has turned this challenge into a strength, and the Review Team encourages the Program to continue to secure long-term sustainable funding.

### **B. Outreach and Public Involvement Recommendations:**

*... Stakeholders concerns regarding...organizational structure, the public participation process, and the SMBNEP's role in the Ballona wetlands restoration project....We recommend that SMBNEP continue clarifying its roles and responsibilities on key environmental projects....*

SMBNEP has continued to clarify roles and responsibilities in regard to its public-private governance structure. In an effort to address concerns raised about roles and responsibilities, EPA recognizes the establishment of a Chief Administrative Director of the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission (SMBRC) to coordinate and support Commission meetings.

In addition, staff refined grant workplan content and the 2018 CCMP Action Plan to better identify contributions of its partners. EPA commends SMBNEP for its efforts to work with the State Water Resources Control Board and other stakeholders to further clarify roles and responsibilities of NEP partner entities, as well as its structure and governance, through the Memorandum of Understanding revision process.

*Continue to use the Watershed Advisory Council meetings as the vehicle for public participation in CCMP and annual workplan implementation oversight, and*

*Continue communicating on a regular basis with all its stakeholders as well as to encourage public involvement in the implementation of the CCMP*

Throughout this review period, SMBNEP has continued to engage the public on its progress and accomplishments via the SMBRC and The Bay Foundation (TBF) websites, as well as in print and social media platforms. SMBNEP also continues to be accountable to its stakeholders by encouraging oral and written input not only in Watershed Advisory Council (WAC) meetings but also during all publicly-advertised meetings, particularly on matters specific to annual workplan development and CCMP implementation activities. While important comments are provided through the WAC meetings, we understand that these meetings have sometimes become contentious and unproductive. To allow for effective dialogue and to help manage disagreements that may arise during WAC meetings, the SMBNEP is encouraged to further clarify expectations

and meeting protocols and explore new ways to improve public participation in updates to the existing Memoranda of Understanding and Agreement and in other documents as part of the CCMP revision process.

## **II. Support of CWA Core Programs**

### **A. TMDL Implementation Through Best Management Practices (BMPs)**

SMBNEP, through its state partner SMBRC, recommended \$200,000 of Proposition 84 grant funding to develop a green street with Low Impact Development best management practices by installing at least 14 Vegetated Stormwater Curb Extensions along a 1,000 linear foot section of street. This project was designed to capture runoff and treat trash, metals, bacteria, organics, oil, and grease from an adjacent neighborhood and park before entering Ballona Creek. This was a priority project in support of the City of Los Angeles' adopted TMDL Implementation Plan for Ballona Creek and SMBNEP's 2013 Bay Restoration Plan goal. Completed in February 2018 in partnership with the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, this multipurpose project also provided habitat for wildlife as well as pedestrian and bicycle access.

## **III. Strengths**

### **A. Program Planning and Administration – Competent, Skilled NEP Staff for Program Operations**

The Review Team commends SMBNEP for its competent, talented staff who provide excellent day-to-day program leadership to help implement CCMP action items. Activities carried out by staff include meeting preparation and follow-up; coordination with partner agencies; grant proposal writing, management, and reporting; and mobilization of a large network of volunteers for outreach events, restoration activities, and training opportunities. In addition, staff technical expertise on kelp forest, abalone, beach, dune, and Malibu Lagoon restoration efforts is pivotal to support the strong coalition of supporters eager to do the work. The success of these activities requires enormous commitment of time, energy, and resources, as evidenced during the site visit. The Review Team would like to acknowledge the dedication of your team and commend a job well done.

### **B. Healthy Communities – Diversity of Management Conference Partnerships on Trash Reduction Efforts**

SMBNEP's trash reduction initiatives are advancing through the strong support of its diverse Management Conference. Individuals, academic institutions, and representatives from governmental and non-governmental organizations have come together to exchange ideas and develop solutions to this common issue. Lessons learned from efforts such as the Clean Bay Certification Program informed SMBNEP partners' efforts to adopt local trash ordinances. SMBNEP's recent partnership with Loyola Marymount University's Coastal Research Institute is already filling important data gaps in microplastic research by developing a draft microplastics extraction protocol and manuscript that have great potential for informing beach management practices and policy.

### **C. Protecting and Restoring Water Quality and Habitat**

SMBNEP demonstrated significant progress in restoring habitat as evidenced by the restoration success at beach, dune, and kelp forest sites. At the Santa Monica Beach Restoration Pilot Project, SMBNEP implemented a low-tech restoration project resulting in almost a meter of sand accreting on-site, native plants blooming, and a visit by endangered snowy plovers. This project was a key partnership with the City of Santa Monica and California State Parks. Notably, it has sparked the development of at least three additional beach and/or dune restoration projects in the watershed.

Further off the coast, SMBNEP has partnered with local fishermen and federal agencies to restore 46 acres of kelp forests off the Palos Verdes Peninsula, increasing kelp, invertebrate, and overall fish diversity and biomass. The results of this effort have informed other kelp restoration projects along the West Coast.

#### **IV. Challenges**

##### **A. Program Planning and Administration – Continue Updating Governance Structure and Process**

Despite efforts by the SMBNEP to clarify how each partner entity supports the function of the NEP, the SMBNEP could benefit from further clarification of its general operational structure and decision-making processes. We acknowledge the complexity of the current SMBNEP structure – with the SMBRC overseeing the governance structure and TBF serving as CWA Section 320 grant recipient. The Review Team appreciates that the SMBNEP is currently updating its agreements among entities that make up the NEP to clarify roles and responsibilities.

The Review Team recommends that the SMBNEP continue its efforts to clarify its working relationships as it updates the Memoranda of Understanding and Agreement. The resulting documents should include explanations of what an NEP is, the role of SMBNEP in the watershed, the primary responsibilities of parties of the SMBNEP Management Conference, and the intended roles and functions of its committees in the decision-making process. Additionally, the updated responsibilities of the host entity, NEP Director, and all NEP staff who support the successful implementation of its CCMP should be enumerated. Consultation with EPA Headquarters and regional office staff is encouraged. Clarity about the NEP structure and decision-making process is critical to the Program's continued success.

##### **B. Outreach and Public Involvement – Communicate the NEP Brand and Successes to External Audiences**

Many NEPs struggle with striking a fine balance between acknowledging the valuable contribution of partners and not minimizing their own pivotal role in CCMP implementation. In addition, the NEP model of governance is often not readily apparent to the general public unless individuals are actively engaged in the process. Key to the SMBNEP's future growth and long-term success is ensuring that the Program continues to be recognized for its work and remains highly visible throughout its watershed, and that the SMBNEP's essential contributions to the long-term health and sustainability of the estuary and its contributing watershed are well understood by the general public.

The Review Team recommends that the SMBNEP develop additional mechanisms for communicating updates and successes to external audiences to better promote the SMBNEP brand throughout its watershed. These could include a unified website that communicates the SMBNEP's organizational structure and programmatic accomplishments. A dedicated SMBNEP website will also simplify and improve tracking of progress made in implementing actions in the revised CCMP over time. Additionally, including the SMBNEP's logo on all publications and outreach materials will enable the public to readily recognize branding and associated work products with the organization.

Thank you again for participating in the PE process. We welcome any additional thoughts you may have either about the evaluation process itself or about EPA's involvement in the implementation of the SMBNEP's CCMP. Congratulations again and EPA looks forward to our continued partnership to protect and restore the Santa Monica Bay watershed. If you have any questions or comments, please contact me at (202) 566-2954 or Vince Bacalan at (202) 566-0930.

Sincerely,



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Acting Chief, Partnership Programs Branch  
Office of Wetlands, Oceans and Watersheds  
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

cc:

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