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COMMUNITY-BASED WATERSHED MANAGEMENT

LESSONS FROM THE NATIONAL ESTUARY PROGRAM

FEBRUARY, 2005

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Much has been learned from the NEPs' experience. The NEPs have succeeded because they focus on the watershed, use science to inform decision-making, emphasize collaborative problem solving, and involve the public. The combination of these four elements has produced many positive results. The age-old adage: "A chain is only as strong as its weakest link;" tells us that successful watershed management depends on fulfilling all of the core elements. Some of the key ways in which the NEPs realize the core elements include:

Establishing governance structures according to watershed boundaries. Because environmental problems do not conform to political jurisdictions, the NEPs define their management areas and management committees according to watershed boundaries and the ecosystems within them. Where watersheds cross political jurisdictions, the NEPs establish partnerships that enable them to draw upon the full range of available management resources and tools. This watershed and ecosystem-based approach allows the NEPs to better understand and address the complex environmental problems found in estuaries.

Using science to develop and implement the Management Plan. The NEPs use science to assess estuary conditions, develop solutions to estuary problems, and adapt management efforts. They conduct a Technical Characterization that describes the quality of the estuary, defines its problems, and links problems to causes. The NEPs use these findings to develop the Management Plan. Science is also employed during implementation to monitor water quality and habitat and guide restoration and protection decisions. By basing decisions on sound science, stakeholders see the NEPs as credible sources of information.

Fostering collaborative problem solving. The NEPs invest a considerable amount of time to facilitate consensus on complex environmental issues. They develop mechanisms such as charters, bylaws, or memoranda of agreement to provide a framework for resolving conflicts. The NEP directors strive to be neutral parties to avoid being viewed as representing a particular entity or stakeholder. The NEPs use these mechanisms and skills to work in collaboration with the stakeholders and prevent conflicting agendas from derailing the program.

Informing and involving stakeholders to sustain commitment. The NEPs involve affected jurisdictions, agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and individuals in the writing and implementation of the Management Plan. The NEPs inform stakeholders about

the estuary and their mission, goals, objectives, and progress to ensure their sustained commitment. The NEPs involve stakeholders through such mechanisms as opinion surveys and small group meetings as well as formal participation on citizen advisory and other committees.

Leveraging limited funding resources to ensure implementation. A diversity of long-term funding sources are critical. The NEPs develop finance plans and strategic alliances with implementing partners to attract funds from various sources. The plans enable the NEPs to sift through potential funding sources and identify a variety of sources to pursue. The strategic alliances enable the NEP to cultivate partners who bring resources to the table for collaboration over long periods of time.

Measuring and communicating results to build support. The NEPs develop clear and realistic measures of success and use a variety of media to communicate them to all stakeholders. The NEPs translate environmental and programmatic results into plain English, telling a story about the estuary and its watershed that the public and local officials can understand.

We hope that the wealth of knowledge, experience, and tools presented here can help you to further watershed protection and restoration in your area. The NEP can serve as a model for future watershed protection and restoration efforts. The lessons learned by the 28 NEPs can be adapted for use in a variety of watershed management situations, both coastal and non-coastal. We also would like to hear how you used this guide, what you liked or disliked, and the lessons you learned while conducting your watershed projects. Please send us your comments through EPA's feedback link at www.epa.gov/owow/estuaries/contact.htm.