TESTIMONY

Presented to

Subcommittee on Water Resources
Transportation and Infrastructure Committee
United States House of Representatives

Submitted by

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Chairwoman Johnson, Ranking Member Boozman and members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Richard Ribb, and I am the Director of the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program. I am here today representing the Association of National Estuary Programs. On behalf of the Association, I would like to express my appreciation to Chairwoman Johnson and Ranking Member Boozman as well to the other Subcommittee members for this opportunity to talk about the work of the National Estuary Program

The urgency of restoring and protecting our coasts and estuaries has never been greater. Estuaries provide a wide range of services of local and national importance. These include commercial and recreational fishing, transportation, defense, boating, research and learning, and providing irreplaceable wildlife and fisheries habitat. At this time over 50% of the U.S. population lives in coastal areas – putting pressure on the critical ecological and economic resources in our estuaries.

Purpose of the National Estuary Program

We appreciate the continued support of members of Congress for the National Estuary Program (NEP). This national network of coastal watershed partnerships has been at the forefront of ecosystem protection and restoration for over 20 years. Ringing the United States coastline from Puget Sound to Casco Bay, the NEPs were created by Congress through a far-sighted piece of legislation under Section 320 of the Clean Water Act. The legislation required that each NEP be organized under and guided by an inclusive stakeholder-based management structure with the purpose of protecting and restoring estuaries around the nation that are important for their economic, environmental and cultural resources.

Together the 28 NEP watersheds include more than 42 percent of the continental U.S. shoreline. Fifteen percent of all Americans live within NEP-designated watersheds; a group that contains some of the most densely populated areas in the country. Estuaries provide habitat for more than 75% of America's commercial fish catch, and 80-90% of the recreational fish catch. Estuarine-dependent fisheries are among the most valuable, with an estimated worth of $1.9 billion nationwide.

With strong Congressional support, the National Estuary Program has been a front line response to the pressures on our coastal ecosystems. This program represents a successful non-regulatory approach to defining and addressing the problems in our estuaries. Citizens, municipalities, environmental groups and interested business and industry organizations are brought together with State and Federal governments to reach agreement on long-term management plans call Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plans or CCMPs. These community-based plans seek to guarantee the economic and biological productivity of the nation's estuaries into the future.

The NEP is a broad-based program, taking a comprehensive approach to addressing the wide range of problems facing the Nation's estuaries: preventing habitat degradation and loss of recreational and commercial fisheries; protecting and improving water quality; pioneering watershed management techniques; controlling sewage outfalls and septic system impacts; mitigating impacts from increasing land development; developing strategies to deal with invasive species and harmful algal blooms - the list goes on and reflects the inter-related nature of these problems and the community-based nature of the NEP approach.

The NEP process, built upon local roots but connected to state and federal resources, has been widely recognized as an effective method for meeting local and regional needs. In fact, the recently released U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy preliminary report recognizes the importance of the National Estuary Program and specifically notes that "the NEP concentrates on bringing together stakeholders in particular areas that are in or approaching a crisis situation. The assessment and planning process used by the National Estuary Program holds promise for the future of ecosystem-based management." And the Administration has noted that "the NEP is EPA's flagship watershed protection effort. The NEP provides inclusive, community-based planning and action at the watershed level and has an established record of improvements to ecosystem conditions."

Citizens see these programs (and their staffs) as a part of a governmental structure that uses resources efficiently, is responsive to their needs, and is effective in solving problems and raising issues and awareness. NEPs have been particularly effective in identifying and funneling relevant resources (grants, technical assistance, etc.) to states, communities and citizens' groups.

Through its now 21 years of experience, the National Estuary Program has served as an effective and adaptive model for developing solutions to complex environmental problems. The NEP has been the laboratory and testing ground for the watershed management techniques now being applied across the country and it continues to introduce innovative technologies and adaptive approaches to estuary problems.

How the NEP works:

A key strength of the National Estuary Program is the collaborative, non-regulatory approach employed that has been proven to be successful in restoring the nation's estuaries. Listed below are aspects of the NEP that make it a unique and effective program:

- The NEP is unique in that it expressly requires a stakeholder-based approach;
- CCMPs are the collective stakeholder vision and set of solutions for the estuary and its watershed;
- The NEP collaborative model provides an ability to significantly leverage federal investments;

- NEPs identify emerging estuary issues and work to increase the scientific understanding of key issues that affect our coastlines including climate change/sea level rise, nutrient over-enrichment, shoreline development, harmful algae blooms, fish and shellfish diseases, and invasive species;
- NEPs work to ensure that management decisions are based on good science - NEP scientific work supports federal, state and local regulatory work in many cases (TMDLs, wetlands protection, stormwater Phase II, atmospheric deposition, etc.);
- NEPs convene people, funding and science around key estuary issues and provide a neutral forum for discussing issues;
- NEPs continually seek to create meaningful opportunities for public involvement in environmental decision-making and in positive environmental actions that build stewardship;
- NEPs are community-based networks – well-integrated into local priority-setting and action implementation. They have built trust and strong working relationships with a variety of partners.

Is the NEP Effective? A History of Environmental Results

Are the NEPs effective? We think you have the evidence, 21 years of evidence and 28 examples, assuring you that your investment, on behalf of the citizens of this country, is cleaning our nation's waters and restoring habitat that has been degraded and destroyed in the past.

Collectively, the 28 programs have restored over 1,100,000 acres of habitat since 2000. And there are many individual success stories from across the programs.

From Casco Bay, Maine where reducing bacteria contamination has resulted in opening thousands of acres of formerly closed shellfish beds to
Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island where the NEP brought federal, state, and local partners together to restore a 40-acre wetland creating a shellfish nursery where fisheries had been decimated by thermal impacts of a power plant which revamped its system and built a closed cooling system
Sarasota Bay, Florida which has reduced nitrogen loading inputs by fifty percent reduction since 1988 and the manufacture and deployment of over 5,000 artificial reef modules to
Galveston Bay, Texas where over 4,500 acres of wetland habitats were restored, protected, and created through public-private partnership efforts between 1995 and 2000 to
Morro Bay, California and the purchase and creation of the Chorro Creek Ecological Reserve – providing a 580-acre property that reopens miles of freshwater wetlands restoring flood protection.

As one example, the Lower Columbia River Estuary Program recently received $1.5 million from the Bonneville hydroelectric power facility to develop and implement salmon restoration projects in that estuary. In my home state of Rhode Island, the NEP has been instrumental in bringing to life and managing major coastal restoration projects, convincing the State to invest $600,000 in a key restoration project this year. The Tampa Bay Program was a key force in securing millions of local and state dollars for wastewater treatment to reduce the high levels of nutrients that were harming Tampa Bay. The Long Island Sound Program has created one of the few successful and effective pollutant trading programs in the nation and helped secure state bond funds that will help pay the estimated $8 billion dollar cost of treatment plant upgrades for Long Island Sound.

Environmental Improvement:

Tillamook Bay NEP – Oregon
The Tillamook Bay Estuary Partnership worked with a local dairy cooperative to halt the discharge of dairy processing effluent into the Wilson River which had been causing bacterial contamination. Now, the bacteria levels in that river have seen a steady decline.

Sarasota Bay NEP – Florida
To enhance local marine fisheries, the Sarasota Bay NEP worked with a coalition of interests including fishing associations to place over 5,000 artificial reef modules in key areas.

Barataria-Terrebonne NEP – Louisiana
Louisiana has lost tremendous amounts of land and wetlands to subsidence. The Barataria-Terrebonne NEP and partners are using clean dredged materials to rebuild a 2.25 mile long coastal ridge and wetland complex with a total of 120 acres being restored. Not only will this project provide increased habitat value, it is part of an ongoing vision to recreate coastal ridges that provide significant storm surge protection.

Buzzards Bay NEP – Massachusetts
The Buzzards Bay NEP has a long history of supporting local protection and restoration efforts through grants to municipal partners. With last year's increase in NEP funding, the BBEP made $104,000 available to fund municipal restoration, stormwater abatement, wetlands and infrastructure projects.

Support and Resources: Return on Investment

Because the NEPs are collaborations of many partners, we have leveraged your investment well beyond the 1:1 requirement. Nationally, we are leveraging the investment of federal dollars at an average ratio of 11:1. This investment of partners' dollars shows a very real commitment by thousands of local partners in every NEP.

Here are a few examples of local funding support:

Tampa Bay NEP – Florida
In Tampa Bay, the Tampa Bay NEP has had a long track record of environmental success and has built strong local support. One example of that support is the fact that, through a local intergovernmental agreement, the program receives over $400,000 annually to support CCMP implementation.

Narragansett Bay NEP – Rhode Island/Massachusetts
As the home to many rivers whose water power fueled the Industrial Revolution, the Narragansett Bay watershed also inherited the ecologically damaging legacy of the era – many dammed rivers that prevent fish passage. The Narragansett Bay NEP worked with local and state officials to build support for state funding of coastal habitat projects. In 2003, the state created a coastal habitat restoration fund which has supported dozens of key projects since that time. The NEP also has catalyzed support for major restoration projects with federal partners like the Army Corps and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service – state capital funding over the last 5 years for these major projects totals over $800,000.

San Juan NEP – Puerto Rico

With many challenges to face, the San Juan NEP has worked to build strong local support. The most recent evidence of that is the passage of a bill by the Puerto Rico House of Representatives that would provide direct dedicated local funding to the program for CCMP implementation. The bill now awaits passage by the P.R. Senate.

Reauthorization of the National Estuary Program

In discussions on how a reauthorized National Estuary Program might be shaped, NEP staff and stakeholders have identified a few key items that would strengthen CCMP implementation and increase collaboration in our estuaries.

- Specifically recognize the National Estuary Programs as ecosystem-based management programs. The specific charge for the NEPs in the Clean Water Act is use a holistic ecosystem approach to advance the protection and restoration of the chemical, physical and biological integrity of the 28 designated estuaries.

- Retain the stakeholder-based non-regulatory nature of the program. This fundamental feature of the program has allowed it to function as a neutral forum and a mechanism to convene all partners in environmental actions.

- Ensure that Section 320 funding is directed to the on-the-ground locally-based Estuary programs. Results measured annually for the Government Performance and Review Act are keyed to local watershed results. Enhanced capacity for the local NEPs by better targeting Section 320 funding means more results across the board to report through GPRA.

- Ensure that federal agencies that have protection and restoration responsibilities at the regional, state and local level more effectively coordinate with local priorities and programs like the NEP. When these federal agencies are creating their annual workplans, they should incorporate needs and priorities identified at the local and state level. A tremendous amount of work has gone into gaining consensus on local priorities; let's make sure we make the best use of this work.

We thank the Committee members for providing us the opportunity to share our views with you. We are glad to be part of the Congress' efforts to achieve progress on coastal resource protection and restoration. I would be glad to answer any questions you may have, and again thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.