

## Steering Committee Meeting

Zoom Meeting

December 16, 2021

2:00pm to 4:00pm

### MEETING NOTES

#### Attendees

Regina Lyons, Chair, US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA Region 1)  
Caitlin Chaffee, Vice Chair, Narragansett Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (NBNERR)  
Molly Allard, Northern RI Conservation District  
Eric Boettger, Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)  
Colleen Brown, Town of Swansea, MA  
Alex Carlie-Dorsey, EPA  
Stefanie Covino, Blackstone Watershed Collaborative  
Gina Demarco, Northern RI Conservation District  
Richard Friesner, NEIWPC  
Walter Galloway, RI Rivers Council (RIRC)  
Ben Greenstein, Roger Williams University (RWU)  
Allison Hamel, RI Department of Transportation (RIDOT)  
Allen Hance, RWU  
Rob Johnston, Clark University  
Cristina Kennedy, MA Division of Ecological Restoration (MADER)  
Sue Kiernan, RI Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM)  
Hillary King, Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (MAEOEEA)  
Tom Kutcher, RI Natural History Survey  
Alicia Lehrer, Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council (WRWC)  
Catalina Martinez, National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)  
Conor McManus, RIDEM  
Dave Monti, No Fluke Fishing and Providence Journal  
Kate Michaud, Town of Warren, RI  
Bill Napolitano, Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District (SRPEDD)  
John O'Brien, The Nature Conservancy, RI Chapter  
Heidi Ricci, Mass Audubon  
Arnold Robinson, Fuss & O'Neill  
Bob Rulli, Town of Warren, RI  
Karla Sangrey, Upper Blackstone Clean Water  
Jonathan Stone, Save The Bay  
Susan Sullivan, NEIWPC  
Nate Vinhateiro, URI Coastal Institute  
Caitlyn Whittle, EPA Region 1  
Mike Gerel, NBEP  
Courtney Schmidt, NBEP

## Meeting Opening

Regina Lyons with EPA Region 1, Chair of the Steering Committee (SC) called the meeting to order at 2:05pm. She welcomed members and asked everyone to introduce themselves. *DECISION: The notes for the September 23, 2021 meeting were approved by a motion (Walt Galloway, RIRC), and a second (Dave Monti, No Fluke Fishing).* Mike Gerel with NBEP noted that the [PPT](#) from today's meeting will be posted later today. Highlights from this presentation and the discussion at the meeting are provided in these notes.

## Program Report

Mike and Courtney Schmidt with NBEP offered the following NBEP quarterly program report.

### Financials

The discussion began by sharing details of the financial report. NBEP is in good financial health, with spending somewhat less than expected due to two open positions at NBEP. NBEP has spent nearly \$200,000 in FY2022, with approximately \$84,000 since joining RWU. There is \$334,000 leftover at NEIWPC. NBEP, EPA, RWU and NEIWPC are assessing how much of that money needs to stay at NEIWPC to meet obligations and what money can be transferred to RWU.

### Host Transition

The host transition from NEIWPC to RWU is mostly complete. NBEP needs to complete bylaws, shift office phones from NEIWPC to RWU, and execute the office space agreement with RIDEM. We expect these efforts to be complete by the next SC meeting on March 17<sup>th</sup>.

### People

The plan is to publish job announcements for our two open positions soon (preferably before the holidays). We want to hire a [Geospatial Analysis and Design Manager](#) to replace Julia Twichell, and a [Watershed Outreach Manager](#), which will be a new higher-level position to replace Julia Bancroft, to lead new partner engagement and project development.

### Vision 2032

NBEP decided to pause work on Vision 2032 (our next CCMP) in October. We concluded that for further work on the plan to be productive we needed to meet in person. We expect to re-boot external work next Spring when the COVID circumstances have hopefully improved, and NBEP is fully staffed. In the interim, staff are going to carefully consider the significant input received to date to create refined goals and objectives, and a list of potentially responsive actions. Due to this pause, we formally requested from EPA an extension for completing Vision 2032 until June 2023. Look for a re-launch meeting invite in the spring.

### DEIJ Organizational Assessment

NBEP staff and our consultant Impact by Design continue work on NBEP's [DEIJ Organizational Assessment](#). Building on [pre-survey interviews](#) in October, separate SC and community [surveys](#) were approved by EPA and released in November 2021. 17 out of 50 SC/Science Advisory Committee members [responded](#) and 182 community members [responded](#). These results and further one-on-one interviews with partners will inform a spring workshop to share results and development of a final assessment that includes recommended actions NBEP partnership can take to elevate DEIJ.

### Green Infrastructure Planning RFP

NBEP posted a request for proposals (RFP) on November 8, 2021 seeking green infrastructure planning projects. For the purposes of this RFP, 'green infrastructure' refers to an approach to water management (water quality and/or water quantity) that uses plant or soil systems, permeable surfaces or substrates; stormwater harvest and reuse; or natural areas or landscaping to store, infiltrate, or evapotranspire stormwater to improve water quality, reduce flooding, and increase efficiency of the water supply. Mike has received 15 calls to date inquiring about the opportunity, so we are optimistic we will receive strong proposals. Proposals are due December 20, 2021.

### Blackstone Initiative

The [Blackstone River Watershed Needs Assessment](#) was published at the end of September 2021 and has been well-received. The [Blackstone Watershed Collaborative](#), formed to implement the findings of the needs assessment, held its first meeting on [October 10, 2021](#). A second printing of 100 copies of the needs assessment has been completed due to high demand. NBEP's new [Lower Blackstone Fish Passage Project](#) (Action #14 in the assessment) has held two meetings of a "core team" of 15 key interests to establish meeting norms and project facts and then identify barriers to establishing a consensus pathway for achieving fish passage past the lower four dams on the Blackstone River in RI. One-on-one meeting with RIDEM, NBEP, and individual interests are also ongoing. After several decades of fits and starts, we are pleased with progress so far. John O'Brien with TNC agreed, and noted that there has been more progress in 3-months than then have seen in several years.

### Fishermen Ecological Knowledge

On December 9, 2021, NBEP hosted a [webinar](#) to discuss the final [report](#) on NBEP's fisher's ecological knowledge (FEK) pilot, developed by Shining Sea Fisheries Consulting in collaboration with an advisory panel of regional fisherman, water quality and social scientists, and resource managers. If you recall, this pilot effort is exploring commercial FEK observations of change in the Narragansett Bay from 2014, 2016, and 2019 and how future collection of this type of information may be useful for decision-making. NBEP has formed an [FEK Working Group](#) to explore next steps post-pilot. Dave Monti with No Fluke Fishing shared that he enjoyed the report and the webinar and Conor McManus with RIDEM said appreciated being on the advisory panel and the momentum behind this work. Mike encouraged folks to watch the webinar recording and noted he sees this project as source of new data and a driver for greater collaboration between fishers and resource managers.

### Science Working Groups

NBEP completed a year of meetings of the [Water Clarity](#) and [Social Science](#) Working Groups with the assistance of Emily Shumchenia with E&C Enviroscap. These groups were formed to create a community of practice that can develop/assess potential indicators for NBEP's Status and Trends reports. 2-pagers that summarizes work to date and potential next steps are under development and will be published in spring 2022.

### Science Update

Courtney is collaborating with RIDEM, MADEP, Mass Audubon, and others to create a Science Update on the site of ground-mounted solar arrays to stimulate discussion on how to balance energy needs and forest benefits.

### External Subawards and Contracts

NBEP has closed out all 9 "shovel-ready" and "planning" projects awarded SNEP funds in 2019. We now have 2 subawards and 3 contacts open at NEIWPCC, and one new contract at RWU. Once new green infrastructure planning projects are chosen, we expect to have about 15 open subawards/contracts by spring 2022.

## **Market to Metacom Project**

Kate Michaud with the Town of Warren, RI started by introducing the Market to Metacom Project, which is focused on taking proactive steps toward making the community more resilient to sea level rise. Market Street generates 10% of the town's tax base and is key element of community culture, yet is vulnerable to sea level rise and is already prone to flooding. The intent is to make investments now that will prevent flood damage and unplanned displacement of residents.

A [presentation](#) was offered by Bob Rulli, the town's Director of Planning, and Arnold Robinson with Fuss & O'Neill. Here are a few highlights from the presentation:

- The project focused on how to best use the landscape so it can accommodate commercial and residential structures and anticipated sea level rise. Town planners looked towards Metacom Avenue, which has a lot of businesses, but not many homes. Its tax revenue is far lower than Market currently, which presents a growth opportunity. Additionally, Metacom Avenue's location on a ridge means it is above the flood zone.
- When presenting the plan to the community, planners focused on immediate issues, such as flooding from severe storms and its potential to block evacuation routes. Further discussions showed what the town could look like with expected sea level rise in 2035 and 2050. This near-term timeline allowed people to focus on the "here and now", especially with severe storms such as Hurricane Ida still on front of mind.
- Scenario-based planning was completed that included 'doing nothing,' 'mitigation and migration of Market,' and 'redevelopment of Metacom.' Who bears the costs and impacts of each scenario were presented. Impacts of sea level rise/storms included damaged and abandon properties, challenges to stormwater systems, environmental pollution, transportation, and emergency services. Using modern severe storms (such as Sandy and Katrina), the town showed what "no action" looked like.
- Planning was adaptive throughout to respond to phased relocation and restoration, which would happen over the next 50-70 year and include strategic buyouts. Warren compared their results to other areas who have done this and at scale to illustrate the significant financial investment necessary to take proactive action in line with the plan.
- The town emphasized that they want to keep people living in Warren in the face of change. Redeveloping Metacom Ave would improve the neighborhood and community connectivity. New development would be transit-oriented, with green infrastructure to manage stormwater onsite and buffers between the road and residential areas.
- Above all, Warren wants this to be replicable and create a process that can be a play book that can be tailored to other needs.

Here are some key points from the post-presentation discussion:

- Arnold Robinson mentioned that the cost of property loss resonated with the public.
- Kate Michaud added that impacts on transportation infrastructure and evaluation routes connected with elected officials.
- Kate also noted that the project cut across politics as everyone was compelled by making the very best use of taxpayer dollars in the face of realities the town is already experiencing that are expected to get worse.
- Stefanie Covino with the Blackstone Watershed Collaborative shared a [link](#) for some EPA work on how water quality changes with various land use scenarios.
- Arnold noted the importance of creating and sharing GIS base maps that the public can understand that tell the local story in advance of scenario building.
- Questions should be directed to Kate ([kmichaud@townofwarren-ri.gov](mailto:kmichaud@townofwarren-ri.gov)), Bob ([brulli@townofwarren-ri.gov](mailto:brulli@townofwarren-ri.gov)), or Arnold Robinson ([Arobinson@fando.com](mailto:Arobinson@fando.com)).

### **Committee Member Update Round Robin**

Regina Lyons noted that the bipartisan infrastructure law (BIL) passed, which will provide \$910K per year for five years to each NEP in addition to the Section 320 base allocation (~\$750k) and SNEP (\$250K). EPA is exploring the nuances of the funding, including no legislative deadline for expenditure, the potential for a waiver for non-federal match, and its use for capacity-building. Mike added that at first blush NBEP plans to use base/SNEP funding for staff, and give away all BIL funds, at least in year one.

Dave Monti shared that the Tautog fishing season has been very successful. He also announced that Greg Vespe is the new Executive Director for RI Salt Water Anglers Association. The group is gearing up for large tradeshow (NE Saltwater Fishing Show) in March. If anyone wants to sponsor or have a presence at the show get in touch with Dave ([dmontifish@verizon.net](mailto:dmontifish@verizon.net)).

John O'Brien noted that TNC continues to work with RIDEM on fishery and coastal stream studies. Work is completed at Gilbert Stuart Museum ([Providence Journal](#)), and TNC is looking at placing cameras to study returning fish. He also shared that the Lower Blackstone Fish Passage work mentioned in the Program Report has been going on for nearly 30 years and is exceptionally complicated. He praised Mike for his facilitation and leadership in these discussions, which has pushed the group forward faster than ever before and he is optimistic the effort will advance beyond initial planning for the first time.

Stefani Covino offered that she is excited to be leading the new Blackstone Watershed Collaborative, as it seeks to bring new knowledge and partnerships to bear to implement the NBEP-funded Blackstone Needs Assessment. An initial effort is to pursue local resolutions supporting the findings of the assessment in communities across in the watershed. Cumberland, RI has passed such a resolution and four others are on the docket for January. Please reach out to Stef if you would like to participate or stay informed on the goings-on in the Blackstone ([scovino@clarku.edu](mailto:scovino@clarku.edu)).

Caitlin Chaffee shared that the RI Habitat Restoration Trust Fund Review Team (Mike is a member) met to review pre-proposals for this year's funding. Five proposals were received. BIL money is coming to NERRS through NOAA for habitat restoration, which will be competitive within reserve system. She added that it is expected that some money may be used to support capacity to identify and design projects.

Sue Kiernan added that RIDEM has proposed to move the implementation date of the new freshwater wetland rules from January 15 to July 1, 2022 to allow additional time for an orderly transition to the new [rules](#).

## **NBEP Bylaws**

Regina noted that the Terms and Conditions of EPA's FY2021 Cooperative Agreement with RWU require NBEP to approve formal bylaws by December 31, 2021. The bylaws will replace NBEP's existing Guiding Principles. The current plan is to approve a final document in early spring, which EPA and RWU have agreed is OK to ensure the process is not rushed. She indicated that the Executive Committee (EC) discussed the draft bylaws this morning, and they will be introduced to the SC today. Mike offered a presentation on the [draft bylaws](#). Here are some highlights:

- When compared to the Guiding Principles, the bylaws are more concise and provide greater clarity about responsibilities. Further, text was re-organized and updated to group like subject matter, apply to any host, and achieve consistency with current EPA NEP requirements. Most notable were significant updates to the Management Conference text arising from the Guiding Principles, and the addition of new sections for voting, grant writing & fundraising, advocacy, bylaw amendment, and certification.
  - Management Conference. Standing committee members will have 3-year terms (with the ability to renew for one more term), the host must have representation on all standing committees, and specifics were added to the make-up and responsibilities of all standing committees.
  - Voting. Clarification was added that EPA is a non-voting member *unless* they are serving as chair, and that a majority vote is used for formal votes when called.
  - Grant Writing and Fundraising. An article was added that specifically permits the NBEP Director to work with the host to augment and diversify funding per EPA and host policy.
  - Advocacy. An article was added that specifically permits to provide letters of support and clarifies NBEP's role in education and lobbying of elected officials.
  - Conflict of Interest. The 2-pp Conflict of Interest Policy appended to the Guiding Principles was digested into 2 short paragraphs.

- Amendment. An article was added that stated that the bylaws can be amended by a 2/3 majority vote provided 30-day notice of the proposed amendment is provided.
- Certification. The SC Chair and Vice Chair will sign and date the final version of the bylaws to certify their approval.

Mike next noted that this morning the EC offered some questions for SC consideration:

- Should the Management Conference language from the Clean Water Act and Guiding Principles be maintained in the bylaws as an “umbrella” for all standing committees?
- What Work Plan and Budget amendments should require SC approval (appropriate trigger for each)?
- Should the Executive Committee maintain designated spots for RIDEM and MassDEP given their Clean Water Act responsibilities?
- Does the SC agree that the bylaws leave open the possibility of NBEP pursuing lobbying if the combination of host, funding, and SC perspective determine it additive to the program?

The following feedback was offered by SC members:

- Rob Johnston with Clark University questioned whether the Management Conference concept is germane as that terminology is not used by NBEP in the course of business. Several committee members noted that that Management Conference comes from the Clean Water Act. Mike added that he would like to keep NBEP’s three committees (EC, SC, SAC) organized somehow and suggested “Standing Committees” as an alternative. Regina commented that many NEPs use “Management Committee” and that EPA is not prescriptive on the language used. There was support for use of Standing Committees as an organizing phrase.
- Sue Kiernan with RIDEM felt that instead of the at-large seats included in the draft, it was important that the state Clean Water Act agencies (RIDEM and MassDEP) always have a seat on the EC. Richard Friesner with NEIWPC echoed that having both state agencies deeply involved is a benefit to the program. Jonathan Stone with Save The Bay offered that setting aside seats for RIDEM and MassDEP helps ensure they stay engaged moving forward. There was support for including standing seats for RIDEM and MassDEP on the EC.
- A few SC members felt that like some other NEPs, the SC should pursue lobbying on NBEP’s behalf. Examples would be Save The Bay and The Nature Conservancy who already pursue state and federal lobbying. Mike noted that these organizations are busy with their own efforts, and have not offered up their lobbying services to date. Dave Monti noted that it made sense to leave the door open for NBEP to lobby if partners are unable made sense.

Mike asked the SC to consider the draft bylaws he will share by tomorrow, the noted EC questions, and today’s discussion and provide written comments to him by January 21, 2022. A second draft will be developed and presented to the EC on February 8, 2022, with plans for a final review and consideration for approval by the next March 17, 2022 SC meeting at the latest.

### Closing

Mike expressed his appreciation for everyone volunteering as an SC member over the last year. He asked folks to consider taking on the Chair role as Regina has been serving for well over a year. 2022 SC meeting will be March 17<sup>th</sup> from 12:30-3:30pm and June 16<sup>th</sup>, September 15<sup>th</sup>, and December 15<sup>th</sup> from 1-4pm. Finally, Regina wished all safe and happy holidays.

### Action Items

1. NBEP to share draft of bylaws with SC by December 17<sup>th</sup>.
2. SC members to send comments to Mike ([Mike.Gerel@nbep.org](mailto:Mike.Gerel@nbep.org)) by January 21<sup>st</sup>.

Meeting adjourned 4:04pm