



SASJBEP STC Meeting Notes

2/20/2025

Attendance: Darryl Boudreau (NFWFMD), Michael McManus (US EPA, ORD), Carrie Jones (FDACS), Janelle Johnson (FWRI FIM), Patrick Perno (Policy Board), Zack Whalen (FWC), Joy Brown (NWFL Sentinel Landscapes), Phil Maxwell (St. Andrew Bay Watch), Melanie Kaeser (US FWS), Jeff Talbert (Atlanta Botanical Garden), SASJBEP Staff (Jessica Graham, Ryann Rossi, Rose Horn, Tim Lee, Aleighsa Wright)

February Meeting Summary:

The STC discussed letters of support for projects such as the East Pass and received grant updates from SASJBEP staff. The STC recommended approaching letters from the science point of view and adhering the National Estuary Program guidance. The STC also discussed where the East Pass would align with the CCMP and what science should be evaluated related to the East Pass opening. Additionally, the STC heard updates on the C-STARS, UWF-SAS, FDACS and Marine Debris grants.

February 20, 2025, Agenda:

General Housekeeping:

We have changed some logistics with our meetings due to some unfortunate issues with meeting disruptions. Each meeting now has a unique zoom link and there will be a waiting room from now on.

East Pass and letters of support discussion:

SASJBEP has been asked to provide letters of support for multiple projects, including reopening the East Pass, and SASJBEP needs to evaluate the best practices for writing these moving forward given National Estuary Program (NEP) guidance and advice from other National Estuary Programs.

Background on the East Pass:

The pass closed naturally in 1998 and was reopened in 2001 and closed by 2004 naturally. Bay County is evaluating reopening the East Pass and is in the permitting and environmental impact assessment stage. There is interest in having SASJBEP write some sort of letter of support for this project (among many others).





Letters of support, letter of science or technical support document:

SASJBEP has traditionally taken a stance of neutrality to follow NEP guidance, and a letter of support would provide support or endorse a specific project which would extend beyond what the Estuary Program does.

A letter of support, or letter of science, would need to be tied to the Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP) by identifying how the project would connect to CCMP goals and it would outline the relevant science facts about the project.

The SASJBEP can lean on the governance structure and get advice from committees on how to approach each situation when we are asked to provide letters of support.

Committee discussion on letters of support, letter of science or technical support document:

The committee discussed how the Estuary Program could provide a technical support document, which would provide the science behind opening the East Pass. This kind of document would require the Estuary Program to marshal the data. The committee also discussed how there is a big distinction between “here’s the science” and “policy” and could see that the Estuary Program could be caught between providing scientific evidence versus a letter of endorsement. The committee also suggested that these kinds of challenges will come up but may decrease over time as people understand the purpose of the program and the need to stay neutral. The committee cautioned that if the Estuary Program isn’t careful with choosing projects, it will be seen as an advocacy group and may jeopardize the potential of becoming a National Estuary Program. The committee recommended refining the message of what the Estuary Program is and the need to remain neutral (not the role to take a position and advocate one way or another).

How do other NEPs approach projects like the East Pass and general letters of support:

Based on conversations with other NEPs, they adhere to just providing the science. One example is Midnight Pass in Sarasota Bay which shows options but does not just give support/no support as that goes beyond the science. See the example here:

<https://sarasotabay.org/midnight-pass-what-does-the-science-say/>

CCMP alignment:

East Pass could align with CCMP through connection with WSQQ Action Plan 5.1; NRSC Action Plan 1.1 and NRSC Action Plan 2.1. No additional goals or actions plans were identified by the committee.





Science to evaluate:

The committee discussed what science and data would be beneficial to consider in regards to the East Pass and discussion included:

- Water quality pre/during/post pass being opened
 - The committee recommended including all water quality metrics (nutrients, salinity, dissolved oxygen, temperature, etc) and Harmful Algal Bloom reports or fish kills if available. Staff noted that FWC does not recommend conducting trend analyses with the Red Tide dataset because of the way it was historically sampled and collected (e.g., report based, not consistently sampled or monitored). The committee also recommended doing a statistical comparison of pre/during/post if there are enough data points available. Staff noted that there are a number of samples from the St. Andrews Aquatic Preserve area, however, those are more recent.
- Land use changes
 - No additional recommendations from the committee on this.
- Seagrass cover
 - This could include data on prop scars but this is from more recent times (e.g., 2017)
- Scallop Densities
 - The committee recommended looking at recreational harvest or landings in St. Andrew Bay or Bay County if available and relevant to the time period. The committee also recommended noting the decline in scallop populations across the Panhandle and suggested that something generally impacted the ability of the panhandle to support scallop populations that may not just be bay-centric. Staff noted a possible complication with scallop data due to changes in monitoring over time which could make comparisons difficult.
- Shorebird nesting
 - No additional recommendations from the committee on this.
- Sea turtle nesting
 - No additional recommendations from the committee on this.

The committee also recommended additional science including:

- Precipitation trends
- Fisheries Independent Monitoring Data
 - The committee did note that more consistent FIM sampling did not occur until 2008 in St. Andrews but still recommended looking at trends since then.





Summary

Overall, the committee recommended look at trends for any of the data available to see if there are changes in the data sets for the time period when the pass was open.

Finally, the committee was asked to provide a recommendation on how to approach these types of requests and whether SASJBEP should stay with the science or not. Only 3 responded but supported staying with the science.

Grant Updates:

C-STARs

Goals for 2025 include continued quarterly monitoring, prelim analyses (ecosystem services & other), updated homeowner reports, soil analyses for C:N, and shoreline change analyses. Staff shared some preliminary results from year 1 of monitoring that explored:

- Are there differences in oyster density across construction materials?
 - Overall, we see higher densities of oysters on limestone
 - Committee discussion: For Project Greenshores that was concrete and may need to verify that reefs samples are limestone or concrete or a mix.
- Does fish species richness vary with time since restoration?
 - Overall, living shorelines 5-10 years after installation had higher species richness. The decline in richness after 5-10 years could be a shift in the type of species present (e.g., generalist vs specialists) and we could look at body size to explore this more.
- Does denitrification vary between types of sites?
 - Overall, there is not a huge difference in denitrification or Nitrogen removal between adjacent, living shoreline, and natural sites. Preliminary sites, those without any living shoreline, have very little denitrification.

UWF-SAS

Goals for 2025 include completed sample analyses from the benthic meiofauna sampling in St. Joseph Bay, updated water quality report cards, and updated SOWR data viewer as new data is available. Staff have already made some updates to the data viewer with seagrass and land use.

FDACS

Goals for 2025 include field ground truthing, analysis of stormwater potential, identification of problem areas, prioritization of areas for tree plantings and creation of a tool with these results. Staff have completed ground truthing and found a ~4% error in outfall locations with most of these lacking evidence of an inlet or outfall or the location ended up being a ditch.



Marine Debris

Goals for 2025 include taking inlet measurements, ordering LittaTraps, installing traps, beginning monitoring and the prevention plan. Staff worked with the municipalities on the project to measure over 60 locations and out of those 42 are viable for installation. Staff are currently working with the municipalities to prioritize where to install due to fluctuations in pricing of the traps.

Other Updates:

- VOG monitoring will resume in February
- Tides and Talks March 13 covering Seagrass
 - Virtual options available
 - May 8 will be Open House style which will be an overview of all the programs we have (science fair style), estuary trivia, and networking opportunities

Group announcements and updates

No announcements

Meeting adjourned 1:55pm

2025 STC Meeting Schedule:

January 16	Guest Presentation: "Monitoring Waterbodies through Spatially Balanced Surveys: National, State, and Local Perspectives"
February 20	Grant Update(s) (1 hour meeting)- virtual only
April 17	Guest Presentation: Oysters- Matt Davis, FWC & Whitney Scheffel, PPBEP
August 21	Guest Presentation: TBD
October 16	Grant Update(s) (1 hour meeting)- virtual only
December 18	Guest Presentation, Year in Review

