

Minutes

Meeting Attendees: Haley Burns (PDE), Karen Forst (PDE), Kathy Klein (PDE), Megan Mackey (EPA3), Martha Maxwell-Doyle (PDE), Jason Minnich (PA DEP), Rachael Phillos (DNREC), Chad Pindar (DRBC), Bob Schuster (NJDEP), Will Whalon (PWD)

Steering Committee (SC) Meeting Recap

- During the SC meeting there was a lot of information presented that will require follow-up. The new Region 3 RA had questions about the water quality benefits of freshwater mussels and some of the budget items that were presented in draft form for the 5th and final year of IJA funding. Kathy will work to answer questions that were presented and to hopefully be successful in rescheduling a meet and greet with the Region 3 RA to provide an overview of DELEP and PDE's work with partners to implement the CCMP.
- PDE is working on their budget for 2026 and it is in good shape. At this point in time, what 2027 will look like is very uncertain. As mentioned during the SC meeting there are a number of big NEP deliverables coming up that take a lot of staff time – PDE has found money in the past to support these and will continue to try to do so, but the landscape has certainly changed.
- During the CCMP revision discussion, Javier mentioned that the CCMP should be lean and focused, which was well received by the SC and EIC. Kathy said we should avoid creating a “let's do everything” document and lean into priorities where we can move the needle and communicate our story.
- Regarding the hatchery – Chad reiterated Kristen's comments at the SC meeting regarding if there “is a business plan that PDE is comfortable with”, from an organizational sustainability standpoint. DRBC got some feedback that the mussels they purchased from PDE for the Bushkill restoration project were very expensive. He said that this is something for PDE to consider if selling mussels to cover operating costs is part of the business plan. Kathy said that PDE looking at all aspects right now.
 - Over the years, PDE was turned down for about \$33M worth of proposals for the hatchery – many funders said they would fund it once built, which would be great if that is true and those funds are still available. In order for the hatchery to be financially viable, PDE needs strong partners to support this effort on an ongoing basis.
 - PDE needs to think about how the hatchery fits within EPA's “pillars”.
- Bob said that NJ has 3 estuary programs, all of which he is involved with, and he is always willing to talk, happy to share how others may operate or handle certain things. He suggested it could be good to have a meeting of all 3 NEP directors plus the two regional RAs.
- The idea of PDE moving its offices, and the interplay with the hatchery site, is a big deal. The question was raised about what role the SC would play in making such a decision. The only way to purchase a building, for DELEP/PDE operations or both DELEP/PDE operations and a hatchery, is if PDE can use IJA money that was set aside for hatchery construction. When looking at strategically reallocating this funding, there would need to be SC support. Conversations about the need to find a long-term home for PDE have been taking place for many years.

IJA Year 5 Work Plan

- Prior to the EIC meeting, Kathy sent out two documents – the July 2022 memo from EPA with BIL implementation information, and DELEP's 5-year strategic plan for using BIL funds. These documents provide some context for how we want or need to spend the last year of IJA funding.
 - There was never final BIL/IJA guidance – only a memo. It includes EPA expectations, but it is all about climate change and Justice40. Although EPA provided new NEP guidance after the administration change, they never issued a new IJA funding directive. Megan said that it

would be helpful if EPA provided new guidance that is aligned with current executive orders and EPA priorities.

- The 5-year BIL/IJA strategic plan that PDE developed and had approved by EPA only included a list of the year 1&2 projects. Many of the things that PDE put in the draft budget for the last year of funding are the same or similar to items on this list from earlier years. PDE has never been able to spend the money in one year, so is looking to be more realistic about how we build the budget (such as spreading the money out over the four-year grant period). There is a lot of engagement and capacity building included, as it is easier to raise money for science work. It is hard to cover things like the Summit, CCMP revision, Technical Report for the Estuary and Basin (TERB), etc.
- Region 3 previously encouraged PDE to submit the year 5 work plan by the end of year so the money could be awarded by the end of year, but that doesn't seem likely anymore. Even if a work plan is submitted to EPA next week, there is no one in the office to review and process the awarding of the assistance agreement.
- PDE will fine tune the budget and work on the narrative for the work plan. They will pull together a calendar to show the new anticipated timeline for IJA Year 5 work plan's creation, review, and submission. It will be sent to the EIC for first review, then after incorporating changes it will be sent to the SC for their blessing before final submission to EPA.

Partner Updates

- DNREC:
 - DNREC hired a new CZM program manager – Sarah Bouboulis. Sarah has been with DNREC for several years and was previously at PDE.
 - The Climate Action Plan update received a lot of feedback through the public comment period, much of which was incorporated. It is now working its way through the Secretary's office. It will hopefully be published soon, at which point Rachael will share it with Haley to distribute to the group.
- DRBC:
 - A strategy was published to implement DO work; DRBC Commissioners will be reviewing again
https://www.nj.gov/drbc/library/documents/DRBC_DO_ImplementationStrategy_Oct2025.pdf
 - Follow-up from STAC – Namsoo Suk mentioned that LeeAnn Haaf reached out about potential partnership on the TREB SOE/SOB work. Kristen would like to have a conversation to explore opportunities for collaboration.
- PADEP: The Coastal Zone grant round closed at the end of September. A total of 26 applications were submitted with 17 from our region. The total funding level is still in play. (PDE submitted two proposals.)
- PDE:
 - Kathy and Martha are going to the NEP tech transfer meeting in Alabama next week – it will be interesting to see what is going on with the other NEPs their relationships with EPA, and whether any big changes are anticipated. It seems unlikely that many folks from EPA will be there.
 - Last night PDE hosted a networking event under the umbrella of the Water Table project. Kathy facilitated a panel discussion with Kristen Bowman Kavanagh (DRBC) and Marc Cammarata (PWD). There were about 40 attendees, some of whom are not frequent partners – it was a great opportunity to bring people together and with the William Penn Foundation funding for this project sunseting, Kathy is hopeful she can find a way to continue holding these kinds of events.

Action Items:

- PDE to pull together a calendar for IJJA Year 5 Workplan creation, review, and submission.
- Haley will send 2026 EIC meeting calendar invites.

Upcoming Meetings and Events:

- Next EIC Meeting: Thursday, December 4, 2025, 10am-12pm, via Zoom