

Conversations with Narragansett Bay Estuary Program Steering Committee and Science Advisory Committee Members: Summary of Findings

Summarized by CoastWise Partners

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As an integral part of developing the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program's Vision 2032 Plan, CoastWise Partners Holly Greening and Rich Batiuk conducted confidential one-on-one conversations, both in-person and remote, with NBEP Steering Committee and Science Advisory Committee members as well as other recognized leaders and implementers in February 2023. Responses from the 16 Steering Committee and Science Advisory Committee members and other partners are included in the following summary of findings and the attached 18 page compendium of all unattributed responses.

These conversations were designed to gather information to help NBEP write a Vision 2032 plan that is useful, impactful, and achievable. This summary of findings will help focus the agenda for the next Vision 2032 Committee meeting in April, which will include more in-depth discussions of identified challenges and opportunities.

Goals for Narragansett Bay and the Watershed

Finding: Partners don't see any existing measurable environmental goals for Narragansett Bay and the surrounding watershed beyond those required through the Clean Water Act. However, Vision 2032 provides the opportunity for collectively developing quantitative restoration, protection and conservation goals which are measurable and achievable.

- We have definitely seen improvements, but we can't measure our success against specific targets and, therefore, we can't tell a clear Narragansett Bay and watershed story.
- There are existing statutory and regulatory goals which the state and federal agencies are already working to achieve which we should build upon.
- Beyond water quality and habitat quality, we should consider setting goals for public access and removing blockages to fish passage.

Finding: Partners want to see goals for working together more effectively.

- Consider setting goals related to convening and collaborating which can be measured to understand how effective we have been in carrying out the work through more collaborative approaches.
- Helping partners implement their projects and programs more effectively and efficiently should be seen as a goal.
- One of the key goals is to facilitate a more bi-state approach to estuary and watershed management.

Telling the Bay and Watershed Story

Finding: Partners see the need to tell the story of how Narragansett Bay has been improving, what's happening up in the rivers, and where are the remaining challenges.

- The public needs to hear a consistent and clear story of successes to date, challenges now and in the future, and how we plan to work together to address challenges in the near future.
- We need to be communicating more with our state legislators and the general public (their constituents) so that they understand the progress we are making and the challenges ahead of us.

Unique Roles and Responsibilities of NBEP

Finding: Partners view the NBEP as critically important convenors, providing a safe and neutral space for bringing together different perspectives. Partners find NBEP to be key to addressing the need for a bi-state approach; as a credible source science and technical information; and as being the honest broker letting us know when we are straying from our desired path forward.

- NBEP helps with network building and in making connections with potential funders.
- They bring attention to individual watersheds which has not received the necessary attention.
- NBEP provides specific technical assistance to local communities which is invaluable.
- We (NBEP) need to take a leadership role to provide government, policy makers, and habitat/fish managers with the science they need to make the tough decisions ahead in the face of exponentially growing climate change impacts.
- NBEP provides synthesized science to support better management decision making.
- Their bi-state function is so critical given no other agencies take on that function.
- NBEP is considered independent and a good middleman between regulatory and regulated parties. They stay objective.

Finding: Partners view NBEP's focus on local communities as mission critical

- NBEP has pushed to provide funding for capacity building in entities throughout the watershed.
- There are great projects to be implemented where the local communities just do not have the capacity/bandwidth to undertake such projects. Therefore, the NBEP needs to continue to providing support to individual partners working at the community level as this support is absolutely essential to the success of meeting our water quality and habitat restoration goals.

Need Groups of Partners Working Towards Common Goals

Finding: Partners want to form teams to help coordinate work towards specific goals.

- There should be a limited number of goals and we should form teams for helping achieve each of the goals.

- There are no other organization which is focused like we (NBEP) are on estuarine and coastal restoration. The partners are currently part of a large informal network. That network needs to become more formalized with more sharing of resources among the engaged partners.
- We could use more practitioners-based meetings/forums through which those of us who are working at the sub-watershed to small watershed scale could share best practices, what funding sources are available, what can I learn from how your organization works and why it is more effective in achieving its goals, and how can we work together more effectively.
- It is important that partners are directly involved with developing goals, so that they are everyone's goals and not seen as just the NBEP's.

Scales at Which to Address Issues

Finding: Partners agree that, depending on the specific issue, the scale at which to work will vary from watershed and bay-wide down to very local.

- We need to be working at all those scales as there are actions which need to be pursued at each of those scales.
- We have to be thinking and working at all scales, with different roles to play at each of the different scales.
- Both ends are important. Watershed scale for convening and science communication, and it is also a good strategy to target some funds for capacity building at the local level.
- The NBEP as a whole needs to work at the watershed wide scale, but there are equal needs to work at the very local community scale and providing shared resources and technical assistance.
- We need to work at the sub-watershed scale because local community members can understand where you are talking about and the importance of the work to them as members of that local watershed.
- We need to start at the ground floor and work up from there versus starting from the whole watershed and working down to what matters at the local community scale.
- We still need evaluations of priorities across the entire system, but priorities really need to be set at the local scale working with local communities and with partners which are interested in working with us.

Creating Goals for Bay and Watershed Restoration

Finding: Partners are in agreement on the need for setting goals for Bay and watershed restoration, but there are different perspectives on the entities who should be responsible for setting the goals.

- For setting goals, it's really Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management and the Coastal Resources Management Council which need to be the ones to establish those goals, based on input from other partners and stakeholders. The NBEP should play a supporting role in the establishment of those goals.

- For setting measurable, numerical goals, the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management should be responsible given they already have responsibility for setting and achieving goals under the Clean Water Act and other regulatory programs.
- In Massachusetts, the entities for establishing goals are much more diffuse from EPA having the responsibility for setting NPDES permit limits to local towns which manage the siting of septic systems.
- Given that all the work on TMDLs is done by EPA, maybe EPA should take the lead—but there needs to be a role for the NBEP. Without a TMDL in place for Narragansett Bay, there is an opportunity to develop these goals using a different, more inclusive process.
- The creation of shared, numeric management goals for bay and watershed restoration could be done in partnership between the state management agencies and the NBEP.
- NBEP could take the lead on this, but may need to strengthen their gravitas and get agreement that they can be the lead with all the partners. They are well on their way.

Developing Watershed and Estuarine Habitat Restoring Priorities

Finding: Partners see local partners involvement as key to establishing watershed and estuarine habitat restoration priorities, with NBEP and entities with larger scale expertise providing support during the priority setting process.

- You really need the experience of the on-the-ground partners matched up with partners who are used to working at large scale in order to setting the priorities for watershed and estuarine habitats.
- You need to include the existing watershed-based organizations, land trusts, shellfish organizations, and others working at the local scale need to be part of the process for setting restoration priorities.
- A partnership of a number of different entities should be responsible for development science-based restoration priorities for watershed and estuarine habitats to ensure we get all the social, habitat, endangered species, regulatory, and other perspectives incorporated into the priority setting process.
- The end user agency managers need to lead but the NBEP and its partners could have a role in the develop science-based restoration priorities for watershed and estuarine habitats.
- The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management is not well structured for pursuing habitat restoration.
- NBEP should coordinate development of restoration priorities with their partners and be responsible for tabulating and tracking progress (or lack of) toward priorities.
- Locals should have the lead in identifying priorities for their areas; NBEP could collate what the locals identify for watershed-wide priorities.

Tracking Effectiveness of Nonpoint Source Pollution Reduction Practices

Finding: Partners envision EPA and the state environmental agencies taking the lead on developing and implementing systems for tracking the effectiveness of nonpoint source pollution reduction practices.

- In Massachusetts, EPA manages the Commonwealth’s MS4 program so they should have the lead for establishing and tracking the effectiveness of nonpoint source pollution reduction practices.
- Southeastern New England Program and NBEP in concert with Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management and Narragansett Bay Commission should have the lead.

Creating and Applying Narragansett Bay and Watershed Models

Finding: Most partners believe developing and applying models is needed in support of enhanced decision making, but there are different perspectives on who should be responsible for model development.

- When it comes to creating and applying models for Narragansett Bay and corresponding watersheds to improve management and decision-making, the NBEP’s Science Advisory Committee would need to have some leadership role.
- Also see the NBEP Steering Committee having a bigger picture oversight responsibility.
- Need to involve a lot of the end users—agencies, institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—in determining what models are needed for what purposes.
- The NBEP or, more likely, a subcommittee of the NBEP should be responsible for leading the development and management application of environmental models for Narragansett Bay and its watershed.
- The end user agency managers need to lead, but we need the support of the university and EPA/NOAA scientists to create and apply models for Narragansett Bay and corresponding watersheds to improve management and decision-making.
- We need to bring in an outside group of recognized national modeling experts to conduct an independent review of the models as they are being developed for management applications.
- The scientists who are already creating models should be funded to develop the Bay and watershed models which could be used for supporting management.

Protecting and Restoring Salt Marshes and Ponds

Finding: Partners want individuals and entities with the recognized expertise and representing local communities taking the lead for setting goals for and undertaking the actions necessary for protecting and restoring salt marshes and ponds with the NBEP playing a coordination but not an implementation role.

- We need to involve the individual experts which are well recognized by the local communities and others in the restoration community as well as others who are responsible for managing the restoration programs.
- The Coastal Resources Management Council should have the responsibility for developing goals and the actions within the Vision 2032 as they have significant staff resources and expertise to support this work.

- The Narragansett Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve could take the lead, in collaboration with the Coastal Resources Management Council and the NBEP.
- The NBEP could help build the consensus about what the goals should be, but be informed by the scientific community and addressing the needs of the agency user community.
- NBEP is important as a supporter for restoration efforts, not as an implementer.
- NBEP, working with the Narragansett National Estuarine Research Reserves and the Coastal Resources Management Council, should have the lead responsibility for protecting and restoring salt marshes and ponds.

Coordinated Monitoring of the Bay and Watershed

Finding: A number of partners made it clear that it is time for undertaking coordinated monitoring of Narragansett Bay and the watershed, bringing together the multitude of currently independent data collection efforts.

- Monitoring is critical to understanding both trends and whether projects (individually or collectively) are having an impact on environmental conditions.
- There is a strong need for a watershed and bay-wide monitoring plan that fulfills both project-specific requirements and can be used long-term.
- Long term monitoring in Narragansett Bay is a priority need, fully recognizing there are long term monitoring records for phytoplankton, fisheries trawls and water quality data available for specific stations and regions within the Bay.
- We have lots of pieces of the monitoring scattered across multiple academic institutions (e.g., University of Rhode Island, Roger Williams University, Brown University) and municipal authorities (e.g., Narragansett Bay Commission), but we do not have a means of coordinating these existing monitoring efforts and filling in recognized spatial, temporal and parameter specific gaps.

Need to Get 'Shovel Ready' to Receive More Funding

Finding: Partners see the time is now to become much more effective and efficient in receiving and investing the greatly expanded level of federal funding now available in shared water quality and habitat restoration priorities.

- The time is right for us to be bold in our work across the watershed and build up the capacity to deliver well into the future.
- Need to build the watershed-wide capacity to develop and implement large scale habitat restoration project and programs which involve state agencies, local communities, federal agencies, and non-governmental organizations.
- Build a Massachusetts Division of Ecological Restoration within Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management and forge a strong connection between the two programs and, therefore, between the two states.

Vision 2032 Seen as an Opportunity

Finding: Partners see their collective work on Vision 2032 as an opportunity to be bold and address a number of recognized gaps and priorities.

- Drafting up Vision 2032 is an important effort for us to be undertaking to lay out our shared path forward.
- I feel like they have convened a good set of partners and organizations/agencies to work together on developing Vision 2032.
- The NBEP needs to keep focused, selecting a limited number of goals we believe we can be successful at because if we are not successful, no one else will be and we cannot afford for the NBEP fail.