

Inland Bays CCMP Committee

Monday, February 10, 2025

Quick recap

Michelle and Christophe discussed the funding situation of their organization, which is primarily funded by EPA through the National Estuary program, and the potential impact of a new administration on their projects. They also discussed the challenges faced by the center due to the lack of ready-to-go projects and the uncertainty surrounding funding, and the need to assess the impact on various programs and the capacity to continue work without federal grants. The team also discussed the budget process, the return to a 5-day office schedule at the EPA regional office in Philadelphia, and the potential for a new initiative, a watershed-wide ecosystem restoration resilience study.

Next steps

- Michelle to reach out to Ben to discuss the 319 grant RFP.
- Center for the Inland Bays to communicate updates on funding uncertainty to partners as information becomes available.
- Christoph to develop an "elevator speech" about the center's funding situation for discussions with funders.
- Center for the Inland Bays to pause or slow down certain projects due to funding uncertainty, including a large living shoreline project.
- Center for the Inland Bays to identify and prioritize critical projects aligned with future priorities and capacity given funding uncertainties.
- Christoph to contact the Army Corps of Engineers regarding the watershed-wide ecosystem restoration resilience study cost assessment.
- Christoph to coordinate with partners (including Sussex County, DNREC, and the state) on potential matching funds for the watershed study.
- Center for the Inland Bays to publish the Inland Bays Habitat Management Plan online and issue a press release once EPA approval is received.

Funding Situation and Future Outlook

Michelle discussed the funding situation of the center, which is primarily funded by EPA through the National Estuary program. She mentioned that they received \$850,000 for their annual appropriation this year, a steady increase over the years. The center also receives an operating budget of around \$228,000 from DNREC. Additionally, they have enjoyed funding from the bipartisan infrastructure law, which they will receive until fiscal year 26. Michelle also mentioned that they apply for supplemental grants and have a robust fundraising program. She encouraged questions about the funding situation and updates from the programs.

Federal Funding Uncertainty and Impact

Michelle discussed the uncertainty surrounding the organization's Federal funding due to President Trump's funding freeze and potential cuts to the bipartisan infrastructure law. She emphasized the importance of the organization's Federal funding for implementing their comprehensive conservation management plan. Christophe then elaborated on the situation,

mentioning that other organizations like EPA and the state are also facing uncertainty. He highlighted the review by Federal agencies of all grants and loans, which could impact the organization's work. Christophe also mentioned the potential loss of Federal funding and the need to consider a world without it. He reassured that despite the challenges, the organization would continue to work with vulnerable communities and leverage resources for maximum benefit.

Christophe discussed the potential implications of losing federal funds for their watershed project. He highlighted the need to assess the impact on various programs, the capacity to continue work without federal grants, and the support from other agencies like NOAA. Christophe also mentioned the need to ramp up fundraising efforts due to changing climate and increasing impervious surfaces in their watershed. He outlined plans to determine the most critical projects, seek necessary funding, and communicate with legislators, donors, and the federal delegation. He acknowledged that the impact of federal funding loss would be more significant in other states like Florida, Texas, and Louisiana.

Christophe expressed concerns about the potential threat posed by a new administration, which he believes is more sophisticated and capable than previous ones. He warned that this administration might not follow the normal process of changing priorities and could cut funding quickly, unconstitutionally. He urged all parties, including state agencies and partners, to prepare for this possibility. Michelle responded by acknowledging the potential impact on their projects, which are heavily federally funded. She encouraged anyone with specific questions about their projects to reach out to her or Meghan.

Thompson Island Living Shoreline Project

In the meeting, Mike Harman raised a question about the status of the Thompson Island living shoreline project in Rehoboth Bay. Michelle clarified that the project, which has a lot of funding not at risk, is still moving forward despite some process delays due to supply side issues. Ben then asked about the organization's strategy for future grant proposals, to which Michelle and Christophe responded that they would need to carefully consider which projects to pursue and how much match funding they might need. Christophe also mentioned that they would need to figure out what they would ask for in terms of resources. Lastly, Ben informed the team about the open RFP for the 319 grant and the concurrent Chesapeake Bay implementation grant, and suggested that they might need to think outside the box due to the current funding situation.

Project Challenges and Future Plans

Michelle discussed the challenges faced by the center due to the lack of ready-to-go projects and the uncertainty surrounding funding. She mentioned that they are working on finalizing the inland-based habitat management plan, which has been approved by EPA but is on hold due to the current situation. Michelle also mentioned that they are considering how to identify and align future projects with their capacity and priorities. Jayme, the state resource conservationist for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in Delaware, introduced himself and shared that his team is currently on hold due to the uncertainty surrounding the Inflation Reduction Act.

funding. He expressed hope that they would be allowed to continue work on prior year obligations once more information is available.

Jayne discussed the funding situation for drainage water management projects, clarifying that they were not funded by the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) but through regular environmental quality incentive programs. He also mentioned changes in leadership at the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Delaware, with Diane Gray returning to Michigan and Chris taking over as acting State Conservationist.

Christophe announced a new initiative, a watershed-wide ecosystem restoration resilience study, which could lead to a stream of projects consistent with the study plan. He emphasized the importance of preserving the salt marshes for flood protection, as losing them would be a significant cost to both habitats and communities.

Budget Process and Office Schedule

Mike Harman informed the team that their budget process had begun, with draft budgets due on March 7th and final budgets due in June. Cathy shared that the EPA regional office in Philadelphia was returning to a 5-day office schedule starting February 24th, in compliance with a presidential executive order. Michelle expressed her willingness to provide updates and encouraged team members to reach out with any questions. The next meeting's details would be sent out later.