

National Estuary Program

2023 PROGRAM EVALUATION RESULTS SUMMARY

JUNE 2024

EPA-842-S-24-001

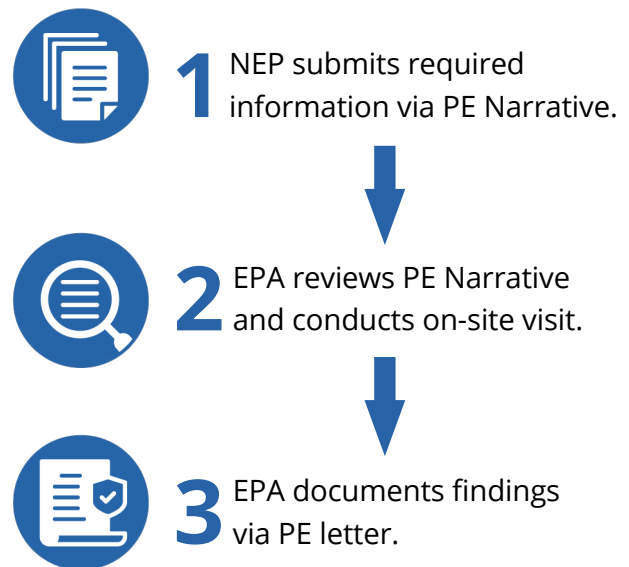
Program Evaluation of the National Estuary Program

The National Estuary Program is an EPA place-based voluntary program established in 1987 under section 320 of the Clean Water Act. Currently, 28 estuaries located along the Atlantic, Gulf, and Pacific coasts and in Puerto Rico are designated as estuaries of national significance. The 28 NEPs develop and implement Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plans, which are long-term plans that sustain actions to protect and restore water quality and living resources.

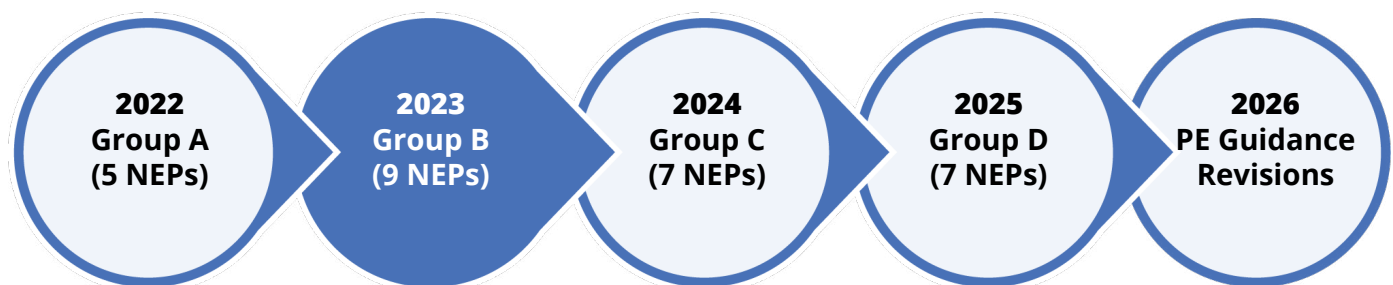
The EPA assesses and tracks each NEP's progress in achieving their long-term Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan goals through a process known as Program Evaluation. This process ensures accountability and transparency on a national level while considering local priorities. The PE process also demonstrates the value of the federal investment in estuary restoration and protection at the local and regional levels. This document summarizes results from the 2023 program evaluations and their significance to NEPs and the public.

In reporting information and conducting PEs, the EPA and NEPs follow an established Program Evaluation Guidance, which was updated in 2021 and again in 2023. For more information about NEP Program Evaluation, visit www.epa.gov/nep/progress-evaluation-national-estuary-program

THE EPA'S PROGRAM EVALUATION PROCESS



THE EPA'S 5-YEAR PROGRAM EVALUATION CYCLE



BENEFITS OF PROGRAM EVALUATION

The PE process has been demonstrated to be an efficient and interactive management approach that:



1 Ensures accountability and effective use of federal dollars;



2 Promotes adaptive management; and



3 Provides a consistent and transferable process across diverse users and programs.



Living seawall signage at Bayfront Park, a demonstration of strengthening existing seawalls with shells, rocks and hollow artificial reef structures during the Sarasota Estuary Program PE site visit.

NEP LOCATIONS IN THE 2023 PROGRAM EVALUATION CYCLE

The EPA evaluates each NEP on a 5-year cycle. In 2023, the EPA conducted reviews of the following nine NEPs' progress during the period from July 1, 2017 to September 30, 2022.

- 1** Massachusetts Bays National Estuary Partnership
- 2** Narragansett Bay Estuary Program
- 3** Peconic Estuary Partnership¹
- 4** Delaware Center for the Inland Bays
- 5** Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Partnership
- 6** Sarasota Bay Estuary Program
- 7** Tampa Bay Estuary Program
- 8** Galveston Bay Estuary Program²
- 9** Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program



¹ Peconic Estuary Partnership's review period was 2016-2022 due to administrative transition.

² Galveston Bay Estuary Program's review period was 2018 -2022 due to Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan revisions.

2023 Program Evaluation

The EPA evaluated nine NEPs in three overarching categories: Workplan Accomplishments, Program Implementation, and Ecosystem and Community Status. Each category contained

subcategories for assessment, presented in Table 1. In its evaluation, the EPA identified common subcategories exhibiting strengths or recommendations for success.

| Workplan Accomplishments | Program Implementation | Ecosystem and Community Status |
|--------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| Healthy Ecosystems | Administration and Governance Structure | Community and Stakeholder Engagement |
| Clean Waters | Grant Obligations and Finance | Education and Outreach |
| Strong Communities | Budget Summary | Monitoring and Assessment |
| | Opportunities for Improvement and NEP Priorities | Clean Water Act Programs Relationship |
| | | EPA Priorities |

Table 1: 2023 Program Evaluation Categories

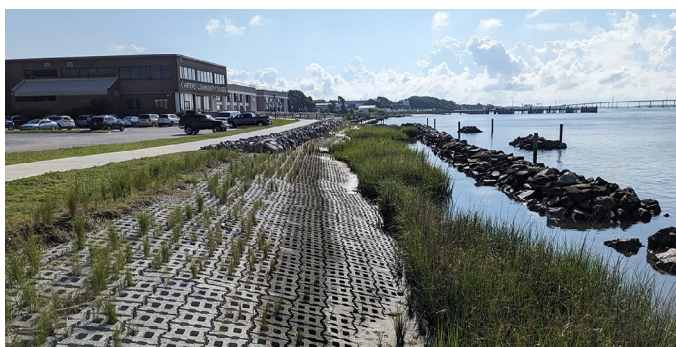
KEY TAKEAWAYS OF THE 2023 PROGRAM EVALUATION

The nine evaluated NEPs:

- Received a rating of “Proficient,” meaning they are adequately meeting programmatic and environmental results;
- Made significant progress implementing their Comprehensive Conservation and

Management Plans and addressed challenges highlighted during the previous PE cycle;

- Supported implementation of Clean Water Act programs and EPA priorities; and
- Demonstrated resiliency and adaptability when challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters.



The Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Partnership PE team and partners tour the living shoreline and permeable walkway project at the Carteret Community College Walking Trail.

PROGRESS SINCE PREVIOUS PROGRAM EVALUATION

The nine NEPs evaluated in 2023 strengthened their programs since the previous PE review, which took place in 2017, 2018 or 2019. The EPA identified progress since the previous PE across categories of program planning and administration; financial management; assessment and monitoring; and public involvement.

• **Examples of improvements in program planning and administration included:**

- Changing host entities, reviewing responsibilities and adopting by-laws;
- Expanding and diversifying Management Conference membership;
- Increasing collaboration with other NEPs with shared priority areas; and
- Revising or updating their Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plans.

• **Examples of advancements in financial management practices included:**

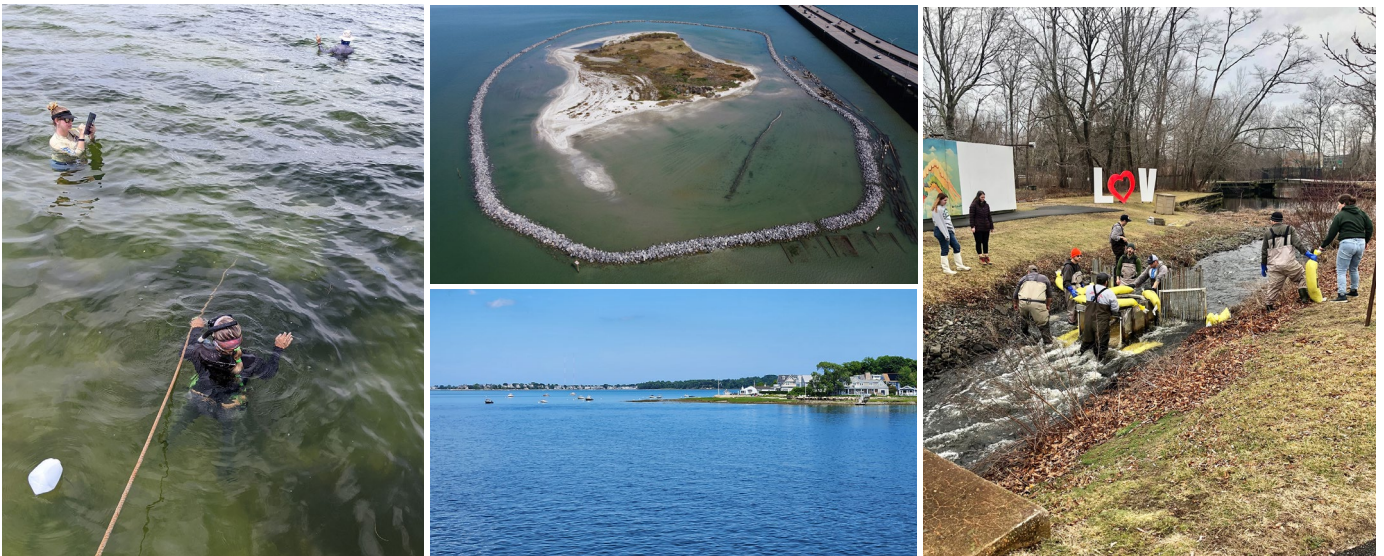
- Exploring additional funding opportunities; and
- Developing and implementing finance plans and financial processes to ensure efficient resource and contract management.

• **Examples of enhancements in assessment and monitoring included:**

- Developing new monitoring strategies;
- Completing a Risk-Based Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment; and
- Creating a report card summarizing the health of the bay ecosystem.

• **Examples of expansion of public involvement included:**

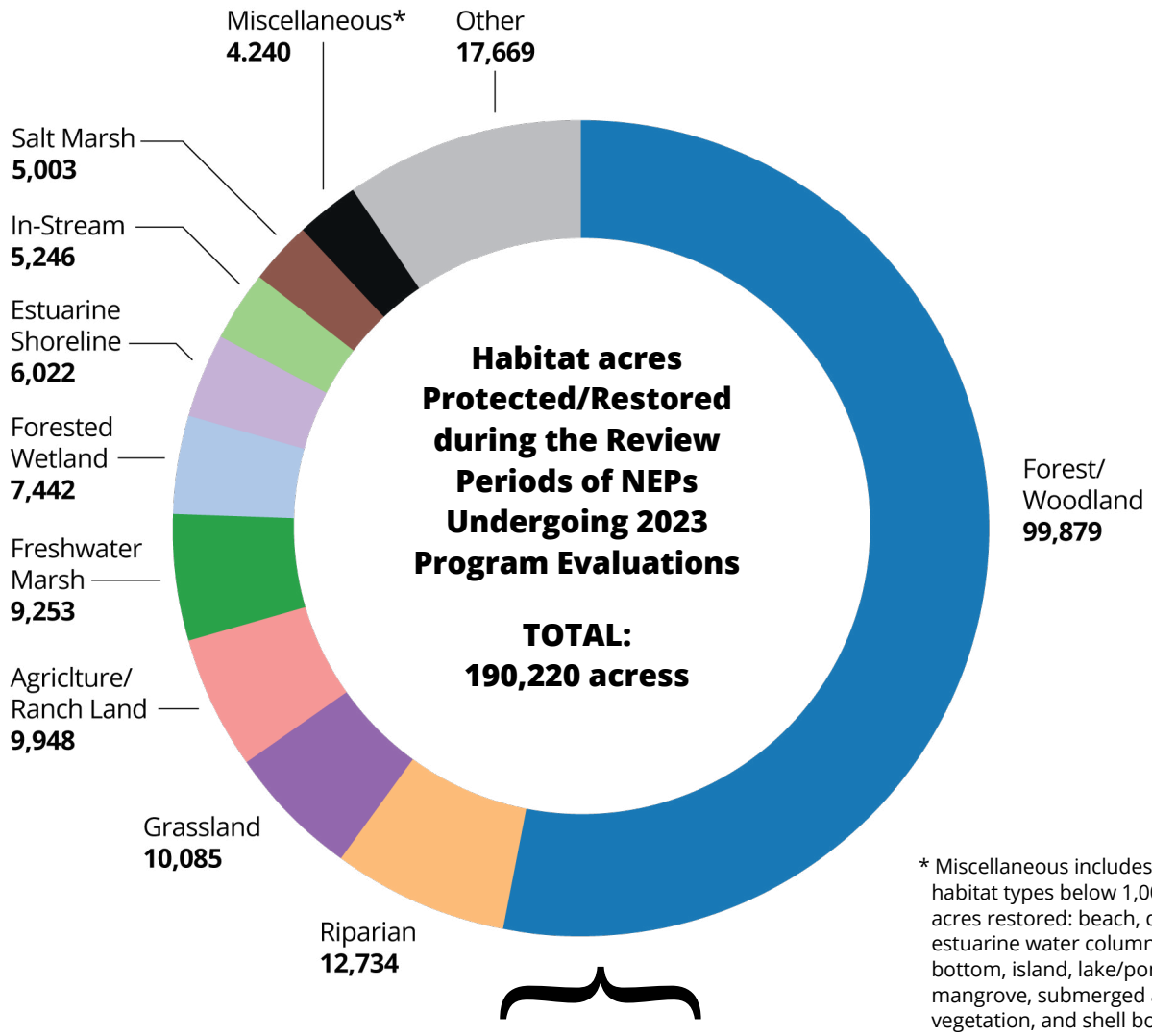
- Expanding outreach actions to build NEP's brand such as updating websites, distributing quarterly newsletters, and conducting teacher trainings; and
- Regularly reporting programmatic results to the public and stakeholders.



(Left) Tampa Bay Estuary Program staff recording water quality data to measure the ecosystem health of a study area in the Gulf of Mexico. Photo taken by Stacey Day. **(Top Center)** Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program's shoreline erosion restoration project used rocky barriers to preserve the shoreline and provide housing structures for marine life. **(Bottom Center)** View from a ferry to Hingham, Massachusetts during Massachusetts Bays National Estuary Partnership PE visit. **(Right)** Volunteers from the Suffolk County Community College install a fish counter to monitor alewife and American eel on the Peconic River at Grangebel Park, Riverhead, New York. Photo by the Peconic Estuary Partnership.

2023 PROGRAM EVALUATION: HABITAT ACRES PROTECTED/RESTORED

During the review period, the nine evaluated NEPs restored or protected over 190,000 acres of habitat.



The Delaware Center for the Inland Bays' work with partners to restore former agricultural land to a forest habitat is an example of a forest/woodland project.

2023 PROGRAM EVALUATION: PRIMARY LEVERAGED INVESTMENTS BY CATEGORY

During the review period, the nine evaluated NEPs leveraged over \$134,154,000 in resources with \$33,862,500 in allocated funding from the EPA.³ This equals nearly \$4 generated by the NEPs for every dollar provided by the EPA.

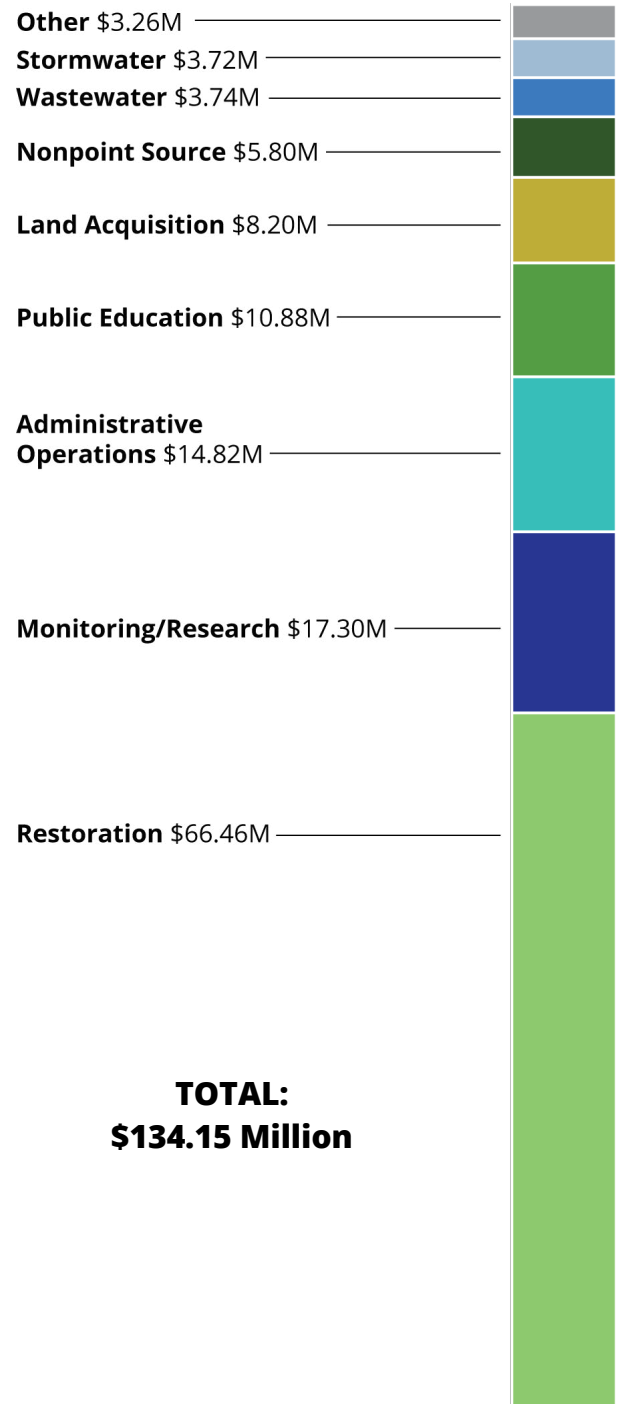


The Galveston Bay Estuary Program’s work with partners to secure \$15.5 million to acquire 630 acres of land for the Coastal Heritage Initiative is an example of a restoration investment. The Initiative is part of the Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund and aims to preserve and restore 1,400 contiguous acres from bay-to-beach on Galveston Island.



Galveston Bay Estuary Program partners and an ex-officio NEP director walk through coastal prairies of the Coastal Heritage Initiative multi-phase project.

Primary Leveraged Investments by Category for the Review Periods of NEPs Undergoing 2023 Program Evaluations



³ Primary leveraged investments are defined as the dollar value (cash in-kind equivalent) of resources dedicated to implementing a Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan above and beyond the funding provided to NEPs under Clean Water Act Section 320, including congressionally directed spending. The leveraged dollars included in this calculation are those in which the NEPs, rather than their partners, played a primary role in obtaining the additional resources.

Results: Strengths and Recommendations for Success

The EPA identified common subcategories with strengths or recommendations for success across the evaluation categories in Table 1. Findings are summarized below. Though most examples are trends, unique highlights from specific NEPs are also featured.

Workplan Accomplishments



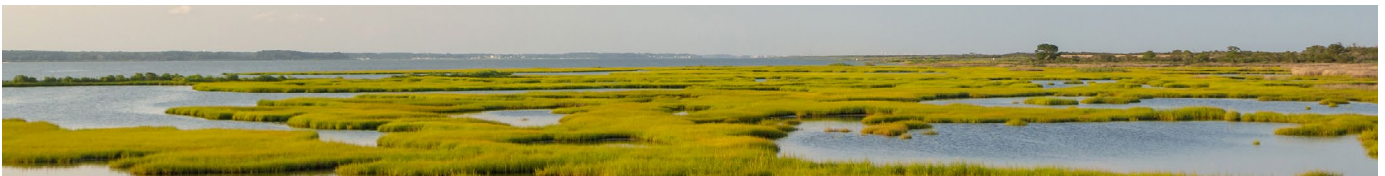
Peconic Estuary Partnership staff remove purple loosestrife, an invasive plant species that alters wetland nutrient cycling, along the Peconic riverbank. Photo taken by Luke Gervase.

STRENGTHS

Healthy Ecosystems

- Implemented living shoreline stabilization.
- Restored hydrology to reduce salinity and enhance marsh.
- Implemented fish passages, improving water quality and creating better economic value.
- Increased land acquisition to protect fish and wildlife and prevent development on valuable bay front property.

Coastal landscape of Assateague State Park in Maryland.



Clean Waters

- Implemented water quality monitoring program to document impacts of disasters.
- Created an online portal with quality assured environmental data that users can view and download.
- Expanded water quality monitoring activities to include microplastics and other emerging contaminants.
- Documented pollutant reductions from centralized wastewater collection systems.
- Implemented a new nutrient management framework to prioritize tidal creek restoration.

Strong Communities

- Engaged communities in a variety of environmental monitoring and data collection activities.
- Leveraged capacity with Urban Waters Ambassador efforts.
- Increased presence in state and local government policy related to climate resilience endeavors.
- Supported mapping tools that enable identification of environmental justice areas.
- Increased public access to recreational areas including parks and beaches.

Program Implementation



Presentation during the Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Program 2023 PE site visit.

STRENGTHS



Administration and Governance Structure

- Developed strategic plans addressing future challenges and ensuring long-term sustainability.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUCCESS



Administration and Governance Structure

- Produce associated documents linked to Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan revisions and updates.
- Define governance procedures.
- Improve Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan tracking systems.
- Expand collaboration with other NEPs (e.g., setting habitat goals).



Grant Obligations and Finance

- Enhance processes for managing grants and tracking spending.



Presentations with location staff during the Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Program 2023 PE site visit.

Ecosystem & Community Status



Community volunteers at a Give-A-Day for the Bay event hosted by the Tampa Bay Estuary Program. Photo by Yvonne Gougelet.

STRENGTHS

Education and Outreach

- Promoted and created widespread recognition of the program through websites, newsletters, mini grants, and science summits.
- Produced a documentary to expand the reach of Trash Free Waters.

Monitoring and Assessment

- Employed the Biological Condition Gradient framework to help interpret the biological responses from stressors and targets associated with habitat conditions.
- Measured water quality parameters to assess the return of key habitat functions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUCCESS

Community and Stakeholders Engagement

- Continue engaging new partners who represent locations that have not traditionally participated.

Education and Outreach

- Continue evaluating behavior change campaigns and continue developing and tracking engagement metrics.

Monitoring and Assessment

- Continue implementing measures to reduce nitrogen.
- Factor in emerging climate change stressors.
- Coordinate regional monitoring priorities and continue to catalyze pre-conditions for more holistic and strategic monitoring.
- Create numeric goals and establish systems to track and respond to progress.
- Provide more frequent updates on the Bay's health and enhance water quality tracking.

High school students pull a seine net during an educational program at the James Farm Ecological Preserve, Ocean View, Delaware.

Photo by the Delaware Center for Inland Bays.



Conclusions

The 2023 PE findings reinforce that the NEP is an effective community-based program for watershed protection and restoration of estuaries. The accomplishments of these nine NEPs evaluated are a result of the strong partnerships formed within their management structure and the dedication and commitment shown by local stakeholders to implement their Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan. The NEPs use the State of the Bay's report to help guide and prioritize monitoring and management actions. While the NEPs strive to improve water quality, a variety of stressors continue to impact the study area, and continued monitoring and management actions are needed.

The evaluated NEPs recognize the need for strong programmatic and environmental

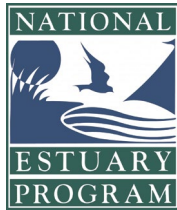
monitoring. Further, they have and will continue to support adaptive management actions for needed improvements, particularly in the face of complex stressors such as sea level rise and coastal acidification.

PREVIEW OF THE 2024 PROGRAM EVALUATION

The 2024 program evaluations will review Buzzards Bay National Estuary Program; Long Island Sound Study; Maryland Coastal Bays Program; New York-New Jersey Harbor and Estuary Program; Partnership for the Delaware Estuary; Puget Sound Partnership; and Santa Monica Bay National Estuary Program.



Fish passage structure installed by Peconic Estuary Partnership and its partners. Structures such as this restore critical freshwater spawning and maturation habitat for diadromous fish.



Learn more about the National Estuary Program:
<https://www.epa.gov/nep>



Photo by Ayla Fox for Narragansett Bay Estuary Partnership

ABOUT THE INFORMATION IN THIS REPORT

This document summarizes findings from the Fiscal Year 2023 Program Evaluation cycle. Information included in this summary is based on the final PE letters submitted by the EPA staff, not the full package of information submitted by NEPs, and reviewed by the PE team during the PE process.

More information about NEP Program Evaluation can be found at:

www.epa.gov/nep/progress-evaluation-national-estuary-program.