

## **THE NATIONAL ESTUARY PROGRAM:**

### **A cooperative approach to ecosystem and watershed management.**

**DESCRIPTION OF INITIATIVE:** The National Estuary Program was established by the U.S. Congress in 1987 to improve and protect the quality of nationally important estuarine ecosystems. The fundamental concept of the NEP is to focus on watershed protection as the basic unit of environmental management, and to include local entities - both public and private - in developing estuary specific integrated watershed management plans. Over the years, the National Estuary Program has successfully strengthened U.S. national and regional capacity to implement watershed and marine ecosystem management, it has facilitated closer cooperation and good governance between states, agencies and the general public, and it has engaged commercial entities to promote best business and environmental practices within the various estuaries' watersheds. This emphasis on consensus building during planning stages has been key to the overall acceptance and eventual success of the final management plans.

The day to day activities of the National Estuary Programs are managed by EPA Regional offices, through a partnership with State agencies, local governments, affected businesses and industries, public and private institutions, non-governmental organizations, and the general public. Unlike traditional regulatory approaches to environmental protection, the National Estuary Program targets a broad range of issues and encourages communities to assist in developing solutions. Lessons learned over the last 17 years in developing, funding and implementing an ecosystem approach to protect national estuaries, could help to successfully protect - while allowing sustainable development of - watersheds through international initiatives such as the White Water to Blue Water Initiative currently underway in the wider Caribbean.

**MAINSTREAMING/SUSTAINABILITY:** The fundamental concepts fostered by the National Estuary Program in coastal areas have evolved from its environmental management predecessors, notably the Chesapeake Bay Program. Today there are twenty eight National Estuary Programs, which have protected or restored over one million acres of coastal habitat within the United States

The U.S. Government through the EPA is committed to continuing this initiative by providing technical, financial and administrative support to the individual estuary programs. In addition, a key component of the respective National Estuary Programs' management plans is a financial management strategy to ensure that appropriate funding will be available to sustain the program and to implement recommended actions.

**REPLICATING THE INITIATIVE:** The National Estuary Programs approach to watershed management through consensus-based decision making has shown to be applicable to integrated watershed management protection projects throughout the coastal United States and its territories. Lessons learned using this approach are applicable to cooperative partnerships within and between nations.

### **LESSONS LEARNED:**

1) Community-Based Resource Management Can Achieve Results: The National Estuary

Programs effectively bring together various local, state and federal governmental entities that have not traditionally worked effectively together. The programs involve non-governmental stake holders in the early development of the project. Involving the public in developing the program has helped ensure acceptance of the management plans, as well as support for implementation of the plans.

2) Governance Structures Will Vary: Each estuary's watershed has specific and often unique problems, citizen concerns and institutions. Therefore, program planning and the division of management responsibilities for each estuary must be allowed to vary based on the local area's needs and institutional/political culture.

3) Measurable Environmental Goals and Indicators are Important: By setting goals and indicators each of the National Estuary Programs has been able to monitor environmental conditions and responses to restoration efforts, inform and involve the public in achieving restoration goals, provide information to establish additional restoration goals, and calibrate/refine ecosystem models that furnish long-term databases for estuary research.

4) Solutions to Common Coastal Environmental Problems and Challenges Should be Shared: While each estuary is unique, they often confront common problems. In meeting these challenges, the National Estuary Programs share information allowing common, workable solutions to emerge.

5) Sustainable Levels of Funding and Financial Planning Must be Identified: Successful National Estuary Programs use a broad spectrum of funding sources - public and private; local state and federal; direct and indirect - to achieve their goals. Programs that are successful at raising funds usually develop strategic financial plans that are integrated into on-going management efforts. Experience has shown that programs successful at financing tend to attract additional funding from various sources and partnerships.

*For more information visit: <http://www.epa.gov/owow/estuaries>*