

Meeting Minutes
Maryland Coastal Bays Program
Virtual Sediment Management Planning:
Introduction to Agencies
October 23, 2023

Including:

[Meeting Recording](#)
Presentations

1. Introduction of Attendees:

Rich Mason, Sabrina Deeley, Bart Wilson - US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS)
Dave Brinker – MD Department of Natural Resource (DNR)
Dave Curson, Jim Brown – Audubon Mid-Atlantic
Kevin Smith, Steve Farr, Roman Jesien, Carley Toulon, Kelsey Poison, Nancy Zeller, Steve Taylor - MD Coastal Bays Program (MCBP)
Sophia Seufert, US FWS Chesapeake Bay Field Office
Chris Spaur, Compliance; Graham McAllister, Navigation Program; Woody Francis - US Army Corps of Engineers (COE)
Brenda Davis – Assateague Coastal Trust
Miles Simmons, Mary Phipps Dickerson – Maryland Department of Environment (MDE)
Bill Hulslander – National Park Service
Amanda Poskaitis, Jen Mihills, James Duffy – National Wildlife Federation
Katerine Munson, Bob Mitchell - Worcester County
Kelly Somers, Patrick Mettigan – US EPA Region III
Joe Allman – MD Geological Service

2. Setting the Stage (Kevin Smith, Maryland Coastal Bays Program)

- a. Reviewed background for why meeting was convened: to improve planning and coordination between dredging activities and beneficial re-use needs

3. Presentations –

- a. **Conservation status of island- and marsh-nesting birds in Maryland’s coastal bays**

[\(Dave Curson, Audubon Mid-Atlantic\)](#)

- Reviewed importance of birds in this discussion
 1. Sensitive indicators of coastal ecosystem health
 2. Iconic species of the Coastal Bays ecosystem, important to the public
- Listed birds of conservation interest in MD Coastal Bays. All have experienced steep declines
 1. Island-nesting seabirds
 2. Wading birds
 3. Waterfowl
 4. Saltmarsh birds (e.g. saltmarsh sparrow)

- Primary driver of declines: erosion of coastal bay islands (detailed in [Maryland Coastal Bays Colonial Waterbird and Islands report](#))
- Outlined principle conservation priorities for MD coastal bay birds:
 1. Create landscape scale marsh restoration plan for 25,000 acres of saltmarsh sparrow habitat
- Q&A:
 1. Jonathan Watson: how is Audubon identifying the 25,000 acres of marsh for restoration and maintenance?
 - a. Answer: 1) SLAMM modelling, 2) vegetation surveys to focus on areas that already have populations of the sparrow's preferred vegetation, 3) feasibility of conducting sediment transport/deposition to selected marshes
 2. Jonathan Watson: Is there some effort to document current condition and/or source(s) of impairment?
 - a. Yes. Some vegetation surveys being done.
- b. **State of the Saltmarshes in the Maryland Coastal Bays** ([Rich Mason, US Fish and Wildlife Service](#)) (30:20 on meeting tape)
 - Presented on the role of ditches in creating erosion/pooling issues in MD Coastal Bay marshes, reviewed promising restoration techniques and runneling projects.
- c. **Irregularly Flooded Brackish MHW Marsh Restoration – Considerations for Engineering Drainage Density and Configuration** ([Chris Spaur, USACE](#)) (46:54 on meeting tape)
 - Challenged the portrayal of ditches being a root cause of ponding in the MD Coastal Bays, as argued in the previous presentation by Rich Mason. Contended that even marshes with no history of ditches in nearby geographies are experiencing severe ponding. Questioned the centrality of ditch remediation in some proposed restoration efforts.
- d. **Sediment Management Planning** ([Roman Jesien, MD Coastal Bays Program](#)) (1:03:56 on tape)
 - Provided a historical overview of sediment management actions in the MD Coastal Bays and the evolution of erosion issues/management over time. See presentation slides

4. Group Discussion

Kevin Smith – we are looking at a continued trajectory of loss with most of these coastal birds.

Dave Brinker - We have not had breeding black skimmers for several years now, royal terns are still doing dismally, the biggest change is South Point Spoils which is where many species of herons are nesting and that colony has undergone a massive decline where all the glossy ibis's are gone due to island loss. Even gulls have declined because of changes in availability of salt marsh islands for nesting. This most recent survey is going to continue to be a real stark slap in the face.

Bill Hulslander - Assateague Island sediment restoration program is a long-term effort that is going on. They have been dredging for restoration for 20 years, it's not a new thing for the Coastal Bays. What are the primary goals for this group, marsh islands, barrier islands, holistic system sediment needs? The North end restoration project, happy to expand on another call.

Bob Mitchell: provided a summary comment: goal of this group should be to schedule out restoration/resiliency projects to line up potential use for dredge spoils.

- **Roman Jesien's** response: this is the basis of this whole group - to line up timing, permitting issues, making sure everyone knows what's coming up and how we can align needs with material.

Jonathan Watson: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) will object to dredging for non-navigational uses. Such an approach disturbs productive bottom habitats used by fishes and other aquatic life (e.g., scallops, horseshoe crab, etc.). It also creates a dis-equilibrium and can increase marsh/beach erosion in other areas. We encourage project proponents to figure out how to re-use suitable material dredged for navigational needs.

- **Roman Jesien's** response: Is there a way we can be less stringent on this? What about situations where shoal areas that aren't really islands and could be put to a higher use, such as nourishing islands that support endangered birds? For example, Skimmer Island, the shoal area south of the bridge could be hydraulically put onto Skimmer Island. We could use an ecological cost benefit analysis to have a dialogue on this.
- **Jonathan Watson:** Certainly, we can have that dialogue and I get the point that we have a focus on colonial nesting waterbird habitat. NMFS will be a tough sell on this. Their focus is to protect fisheries. Could be in support of soundly designed and justified restoration projects that reuse dredge material – it's not clear that this option has been fully exhausted in the Coastal Bays before we go to mining sand bottom. Sticking to re-used material that's already being dredged would give you more success in the permitting realm.
- **Dave Brinker's** response: we've donated a lot of island habitat to bay bottom over the last 30 years and you have fisheries species at your charge to conserve and protect, we also have resources that we're charged to conserve and protect which are being listed as endangered. There is not enough material dredged in the Coastal Bays to meet the needs unless we start thinking outside the box and finding materials elsewhere. There is precedent to take material from bottom habitats to nourish the beaches in Ocean City and Assateague. Colonial nesting waterbirds, which are so iconic in the Coastal Bays, are being left out of this equation. We can spend large amounts of money on beaches, but we have not come up with a way to make the conservation happen for wildlife resources that require wetlands and islands.
- **Jonathan Watson's** response: yeah, I get what you're saying, Dave. And we can follow up in those discussions during the work groups. I think the goal really

needs to be to restore the processes that sustain these islands and not think if we can sculpt the landscape through dredging, 4 million cubic yards and those islands are going to wash away after a couple of years. What is the effect of that on the entire system. Are you creating or generating instability? Are you allowing those habitats to function as they are? Or are we taking a really heavy hand here? I understand, that the birds have real needs for habitat, and that's fine. I'm just saying, that we need to cast a broader net beyond, this is the fish concern, this is the bird concern. I think there's some serious landscape scale considerations that need to be considered before we throw out dredging 4 million cubic yards for you know, a handful of species understanding their needs.

- **Roman Jesien:** The natural island building processes were severely degraded by artificially stabilizing the inlet. We have to understand that we have already engineered this ecosystem and if we have to replenish islands every 5 years, that's not an unreasonable activity.
- **Rich Mason:** We know we have literally thousands of mud flats and pools in the marshes of the Coastal Bays, what if we could strategically pick some of those and make those our nesting islands? Could put a little more material on there and those islands are already protected by the surrounding marsh. There will probably be permit issues and this is probably a discussion for the design workgroup.
- **Mary Phipps Dickerson** commented that MDE would not allow open water to be filled to make an island. *Editors note: This is an important point in island creation and marsh restoration. The Corps regularly moves sand from offshore onto the beach. FWS dredges for marsh restoration at Blackwater. Also, the Corps made 4 new islands in 2014 by dredging bottom and opening the pipe in open water to create those new islands. So transport of dredged sand to fill a need is not novel, we just need to consider endangered species as important as tourist dollars.*
- **Bart Wilson** commented in chat: "Ecosystem restoration, not habitat specific restoration. If we are focusing on one species or habitat type we are missing bigger picture"
 1. USFWS looks at all these systems as one system, if we're looking at one particular species we are missing the point. Doing the same thing we've done for 30 years is not sustainable. Need to think about the backdrop of sea level rise, ditched marshes, and these engineered inlets that have artificially changed tidal and hydraulic conditions.
 2. Lessons learned from a Jersey project in Avalon, they placed sand in the marshes for bird nesting – this was done wrong, but there were a lot of lessons learned that we could learn from.
 3. Need to think about how to create island habitat differently that's sustainable.
- **Roman Jesien:** sediment comes and go, it's on an island one year and it's on a shoal another year and we should be looking at it as a renewable resource. The

islands can grow and shrink but they need some help to do the job that we need them to do. We have to engineer this thing, we can't let mother nature take its course because it's too messed up. We need a plan to replenish islands with material.

- **Jonathan Watson:** I don't disagree. IRA funding will run out and we need to keep this in mind for how to fund this continued work. If we're looking at the long-term, we have to be realistic about how we are talking to the regulatory community about impacts. If we're doing the same thing every 3 years, we have to be realistic about the impacts that can sometimes be downplayed. Being more realistic can also build partnerships and give us more success.
- **Roman Jesien:** Skimmer Island was replenished four years by private funds from Sunset Marina. They were disinsentivised from this practice due to requirements for costly containment infrastructure, so they opted for the less costly upland disposal. Whereas the Corps did similar placement with no containment requirements. .
- **Amanda Poskaitis:** We have really been thinking about how do we create this habitat in a sustainable way that will be sustained into the future. Is it something like Poplar Island, something that will be sustained into the future, where there are hardened structures put in place to retain the material. We are certainly looking at that approach.
- **Mary Phipps Dickerson:** We don't want to dredge shallow water habitat, anything less than 3 feet of water – would need to prove that it was historically deeper at one point to do this. If you're just going to put dredged material in open water in an area in a repeated cycle, that would be hard to authorize. We would want island creation to be done in some way that it could stay there. The fact that the sediment is migrating around is potentially an issue for navigation and could cause permitting issues related to that.
- **Amanda Poskaitis:** The previous sediment management plan from 2005 focused on navigation. There may be exploration of navigation channels and where those need to be through this plan as well. Maybe those could be aligned with island restoration.
- **Jonathan Watson:** A lot of navigational projects where the onus is on restoration to come up with the cost difference. Because sediment has value, we are thinking about trying to build that into these models for ecosystem restoration components that have a cost benefit to them. This type of conversation is going around.
- **Roman Jesien:** thanks to everyone for attending and contributing to the conversation! We want to be as inclusive as possible for these conversations so please spread the word to your colleagues.

A poll was taken using Mentimeter, asking folks which work groups would be needed. The following workgroups Comments were made that a policy workgroup may also be relevant.

1. Island Design & Placement
2. Permitting Issues
3. Dredging Logistics
4. Mean High Water Drainage Density Considerations
5. Plan Development Team

Notifications for future workgroup meetings are planned. Numbers of participants who were interested in the various groups are presented below with the Dredging Logistics and Island Design & Placement receiving the greatest interest.

Potential work groups

