



**ENVIRONMENTAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING
TUESDAY, APRIL 8, 2025 – 10:00 AM
2379 BROAD STREET, BROOKSVILLE, FLORIDA 34604**

MINUTES

Committee Members Present

Jennifer Hecker – Coastal and Heartland National Estuary Partnership
Jennifer Brunty – Manatee County Chamber of Commerce
Kathleen Castor – Manatee Chamber of Commerce - alternate
Dwayne Carlton – The Ocala Metro Chamber & Economic Partnership
Dave Tomasko – Sarasota Bay Estuary Program
Mary Willa Matz – Sierra Club – Tampa Bay Group - alternate
Maya Burke – Tampa Bay Estuary Program - alternate

Governing Board Liaison

John Mitten

Interested Parties

Ellen Cruz, FDACs

Staff Members

Adrienne Vining
Bob Thompson
Brian Starford
Chris Anastasiou
Chris Zajac
Dave Kramer
Destin Dawsy
Frank Gargano
Jason LaRoche
Jennette Seachrist
Jeremy McKay
Kaitlyn Maze
Kristina Deak
Mandi Rice
Michelle Weaver
Randy Smith
Robyn Felix

Board Administrative Support

Virginia Singer
Barbara Matrone

1. Call to Order and Introductions

The Environmental Advisory Committee (EAC) of the Southwest Florida Water Management District (District) met for its regular meeting at 10:00 a.m. on Tuesday, April 8, 2025, via Microsoft Teams.

Chair Dave Tomasko called the meeting to order, and attendance was called.

Governing Board Liaison John Mitten welcomed the committee.

2. Additions and Deletions to the Agenda

None.

3. Approval of the January 14, 2025, Meeting Minutes

A motion was made to approve the draft minutes from the January 14, 2025, meeting. The motion passed unanimously.

4. Public Comments

None.

5. 2024 Suncoast Seagrass Mapping Results

Dr. Chris Anastasiou, Ph.D., Chief Water Quality Scientist, provided an update of the 2024 seagrass mapping results for the Suncoast estuaries of Clearwater Harbor, Tampa Bay, Sarasota Bay, Lemon Bay, and Charlotte Harbor. Dr. Anastasiou spoke of the many benefits of healthy seagrass including that it is a natural barrier against erosion, stabilizing sediment, and reducing turbidity in the water column. Seagrass also helps remove excess nutrients from the water, sequesters and stores carbon, provides habitat for fish and shellfish, and is an important food source for manatees and sea turtles. Seagrasses are also sensitive to water quality degradation and are a primary indicator of overall estuarine health.

The seagrass mapping program began in 1988 and has been noted as one of the longest-running and most comprehensive aerial seagrass mapping programs in the world. The District has been mapping the Suncoast region from Clearwater Harbor south to Charlotte Harbor on a two-year cycle. The Springs Coast, from Waccasassa Bay near Cedar Key south to Anclote River is on a four-year mapping cycle. The Springs Coast mapping began in 2006, and the 2024 Springs Coast draft maps are currently being reviewed with an expected release date of May 2025.

Dr. Anastasiou provided an overview of the mapping process, discussing the three elements: aerial image acquisition, photointerpretation, and field verification. Results are based on aerial photography using a fixed-wing manned aircraft designed for collecting digital imagery. The digital images are processed and signed off by the District's survey supervisor and are given to photo interpreters who then create the maps.

Dr. Anastasiou discussed the different seagrass mapping conventions which are continuous, patchy, and attached algae and then presented the 2024 results as compared to the previous 2022 results. According to Dr. Anastasiou, the results were mostly positive with either no change or modest gains in all the Suncoast estuaries, except Charlotte Harbor, which saw a 6% loss in seagrass. The Charlotte Harbor estuary is at record low seagrass coverage following back-to-back losses beginning in 2018. Old Tampa Bay reported an 8% loss over the 2022-2024 period and was the only segment in Tampa Bay to report a negative change. Dr. Anastasiou presented a table showing percent change for the 1988-2024 period of record and highlighted that except for Charlotte Harbor and Lemon Bay, all other Suncoast estuaries have more seagrass today than they did when mapping began in 1988.

Finally, Dr. Anastasiou discussed the next steps including adding the 2024 shapefiles to the Districts GIS web portal, adding both the 2024 maps and imagery to the District's online seagrass mapping tool, and preparing to release the Springs Coast seagrass maps in May. He also indicated that the District was gearing up for the 2026 mapping cycle with the flight acquisition window opening on December 1, 2025.

6. Regional Observation & Monitor-well Program (ROMP) How & Why?

Jason LaRoche, Chief Professional Geologist, gave a presentation on the Regional Observation and Monitor-well program (ROMP). Established in 1974, it was understood that the comprehensive knowledge of regional groundwater resources was a prerequisite to their management. ROMP was to provide a basis for well-informed decisions on groundwater resources. The original scope was to establish regional monitor-well networks but through time the program advanced as the primary source of hydrogeologic information for many District studies. The scope and methodologies have been refined over time to collect as much data as possible from every site necessary to feed groundwater models. Managing water resources today requires more complex models, so more detailed aquifer data is needed to run those models.

ROMP's responsibilities include:

- Aquifer exploration and testing;
- Mapping the aquifer framework and its properties for groundwater models and regulatory permitting, design, construction, and maintenance of long-term monitor-well sites; and
- Project support with exploration and smaller well constructions for various local investigations.

The three ROMP well networks include an inland grid, coastal transects, and the project support network. The inland grid has 109 sites and is a 10-mile grid spacing which defines the general aquifer framework and its properties. The coastal transect has 59 sites and is used to track saltwater-freshwater interface. The diverse project support network has 220 sites and are project driven so they are scattered based on their needs.

ROMP staff are also responsible for long-term maintenance and repair of District monitor-well networks. There are nearly 2,000 active monitors in the District. Many have long periods of record and are in a constant state of deterioration, so there is a risk of data compromise or loss. The Suspect Wells and Assessment Team (SWAT) is a group of scientists, data technicians, and managers who evaluate unexplained data trends to determine causes and find resolutions and protect wells at risk from development or roadway expansions. The Well Repair and Maintenance Program (WRMP) utilizes ROMP drilling staff for continuous maintenance and smaller monitor well repairs, or coordinates with well contractors for larger repairs.

Mr. LaRoche discussed in detail the three phases for completing a ROMP site: the exploratory coring and testing phase, the monitor well construction phase, and the aquifer performance testing phase. He concluded by noting that ROMP is recognized as a long-time leader for innovative hydrogeologic data collection in Florida and is being celebrated for 50 years. ROMP methods have been developed and refined for over five decades, and the success has come from strong collaboration between drillers and geologists. Lastly, he reiterated that the bulk of ROMP work happens before and after monitor-well construction in the form of aquifer exploration and testing.

7. Environmental Resource Permitting Updates to Stormwater Design and Operation Regulations

Dave Kramer, Environmental Resource Permit Bureau Chief, provided an update on stormwater regulations as it relates to water quality and the progress it has made statewide. Over several years there have been significant efforts to improve the Environmental Resource Permitting's (ERP) role in stormwater quality. In 2020, Senate Bill 712, The Clean Waterways Act, passed. The water management districts, and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) were asked to revisit and update the ERP rules and stormwater design and operation regulations to specifically target and increase the removal of nutrients in stormwater. In 2024, Senate Bill 7040 included several amendments introduced by the Legislature and ratified updated rules related to ERP permitting. It was signed into rule June 28, 2024. Several technical advisory committee meetings were held between 2020 and 2024 to discuss how the rule was being developed and what it was going to look like.

Mr. Kramer discussed the applicant's handbooks, volumes one and two, which include updated stormwater design and operation regulations that apply statewide and are adopted by FDEP. Volume two applies more to the water management districts and is updated to be consistent with the amendments to volume one, eliminated presumptive stormwater treatment criteria, and are adopted by each water management district.

Senate Bill 7040 introduced exemptions from new water quality performance criteria. These exemptions apply to permit modifications for public transportation projects that ensure safety without significantly increasing impervious surfaces, stormwater ponds sized and permitted for future projects within five years, non-major modifications with minimal water resource impact, and permit applications completed before the bill's effective date.

Stormwater quality treatment evaluations address pre- and post-development hydrology and nutrient loading, establish the required treatment efficiency, select best management practices (BMP) for

stormwater treatment, calculate treatment train nutrient reduction, utilize alternative designs, green stormwater infrastructure, and low impact design, apply compensatory treatment, overtreatment, off-site compensation and off-site contributing stormwater, and utilize regional stormwater management systems.

For operation and maintenance requirements (O&M), permittees must demonstrate that they have the financial, legal, and administrative capability to perform maintenance for their systems. The guidelines and criteria require providing a stormwater management system plan, developing cost estimates, demonstrating financial capability to perform O&M, conducting and reporting inspections on increased frequency, and requiring inspection training for those other than registered professionals.

Dam safety requirements include providing dam system information during permitting review, establishing a downstream hazard potential classification for new projects, preparing an emergency action plan for high hazard or significant hazard dams, and providing condition assessment reports for high hazard or significant hazard dams.

Mr. Kramer concluded by discussing the implementation timeline. Anything approved under a project development and environment (PD&E) process prior to June 28, 2026, and any individual permit application that is deemed complete on or before December 28, 2025, shall be exempt from the performance criteria.

Chair Tomasko asked if a lot more stormwater reuse would be seen if more water was added to a wet detention pond and how to get to 80% nitrogen removal. Mr. Kramer responded that the traditional pond was not likely to be the only thing that any given site will need to meet the load reduction goals. From an ERP standpoint using stormwater for landscape irrigation purposes is one low impact development practice or BMP that is going to be part of a suite of things that are being incorporated into a treatment plan to achieve reductions.

8. Sunshine Law

Mr. Destin Dawsy, Attorney, gave a presentation on Government-in-the-Sunshine Law. The Florida Sunshine Law provides a basic right of public access to governmental proceedings at both the state and local levels and is recognized in the Florida Constitution. It also applies to any board, commission, or advisory committee of any state agency, county, municipal corporation, or political subdivision. The Sunshine Law prohibits committee members from engaging in private discussions with each other about District business either in person, by electronic communication, or by social media. Additionally, committee members may not use non-members as a liaison to communicate information between members. The three basic requirements of the Sunshine Law are that meetings must be open to the public, reasonable notice of meetings must be given to the public, and minutes for committee meetings must be taken and promptly recorded.

Mr. Dawsy then discussed the requirement of meetings needing to be open to the public. A meeting under the Sunshine Law is any communication between two or more committee members regarding some matter that will foreseeably come before the District's Governing Board for action and does not require any physical presence. A meeting under the Sunshine Law can be any form of communication such as speaking, whispering, writing, texting, emailing, electronically communicating, or signing a document. A one-way communication does not qualify as a meeting. Committee members should use their best judgement in matters relating to District business and should be considered likely to come before the Board.

Sunshine law violations are treated as non-criminal infractions and can be fined up to \$500 unless a person is knowingly in violation. In that case a person may be charged with a second-degree misdemeanor, can be sentenced to a term of imprisonment for up to 60 days in a county jail, and fined up to \$500. Additionally, the Sunshine Law violation could subject the District to civil lawsuit in which case both the District and committee members would be liable for attorney's fees, and anyone convicted may be suspended or removed from their position. Any action taken by the Board in violation

of the Sunshine Law is invalid. If there has been a Sunshine Law violation, and a subsequent vote resulting in agency action, the violations may be “cured.” The Board must engage in a fully open, public discussion on the matter and arrive at an independent collective opinion.

There are some implications when it comes to social media. Committee members may post one-way comments or opinions about District business on social media, but these posts may become Sunshine Law violations if they evolve into online discussions on matters that will foreseeably come before the Board for action. Some examples of those violations would be communicating about District business over the phone or via text, discussing District business during a recess of an advisory committee meeting, or an inaudible discussion while sitting at the dais during an advisory committee meeting. If a member posts a comment on either their personal Facebook page or the District’s Facebook page about District business, that is not in violation because it is a one-way communication, but if a member comments, “likes” or shares the post, that would be considered in violation of the Sunshine Law.

In conclusion, Mr. Dawsy stated that advisory committee members are subject to the Sunshine Law and must not discuss District business with other committee members except at a public meeting, and refrain from using social media as a forum for discussing District business.

Ms. Maya Burke asked if one committee member emailed another member, but there was no response, would the violation still exist and would need to be reported. Mr. Dawsey responded that it would just be considered one-way communication so there would be no violation.

Chair Tomasko asked if District staff gave a presentation to the committee on a certain topic and the information provided was regulatory information and not an action item that would come before the Board, is it acceptable for committee members to discuss outside of the meeting how they would like to see the effort changed. Mr. Dawsy responded that it would be characterized as foreseeable to come before the board, and advised that if it’s related to District business, it’s best to err on the side of caution and avoid those discussions.

9. Development of Agenda Topics

Ms. Burke proposed discussing how the District, in its role as a PD&E reviewer, could make recommendations to enhance water quality improvement efforts. Ms. Mary Willa Matz suggested reviewing the District’s report on the recent five-year evaluation of minimum flows for the lower Hillsborough River. Chair Tomasko requested a Flatford Swamp update.

10. Announcements and Other Business

Chair Tomasko announced that he will be moving on from his position in November to go back to the private sector and will no longer be able to serve as EAC chair. He stated that elections for chair and vice chair will be held at the next meeting on July 8.

11. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 12:01 p.m.