

MEASURABLE GOALS AND TARGETS OF THE TAMPA BAY NATIONAL ESTUARY PROGRAM

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The Tampa Bay National Estuary Program is a partnership among the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Southwest Florida Water Management District, the counties of Hillsborough, Pinellas and Manatee, and the cities of St. Petersburg, Tampa and Clearwater. In November 1996, partners approved the final Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP) which will guide implementation of a 'master plan' for long-term management of Tampa Bay. Since initiation of the TBNEP in 1991, participants have agreed that the final goal for the program is the restoration, enhancement and protection of the bay's critical living resources. This includes both the physical structure of important habitats and the animal communities which inhabit them. To reach the final goal, participants have adopted measurable restoration and protection targets for seagrass and estuarine wetlands and an associated water quality strategy needed to maintain conditions necessary to meet those targets.

SEAGRASS AND WATER QUALITY GOALS

In 1993, the Tampa Bay NEP established a long-term seagrass restoration target of restoring seagrasses to 1950s acreage, excluding areas that have been permanently altered by dredging and filling. Subsequent studies by the NEP indicate that as many as 12,000 acres of seagrass can be recovered over time by maintaining existing water clarity and "holding the line" on nitrogen loading at existing levels. Excess nitrogen can result in algal growth and reduced water clarity, blocking sunlight from reaching

submerged seagrasses.

To meet this goal, local communities have agreed to reduce or preclude their nitrogen loadings to the bay by about 7% by the year 2010 to compensate for anticipated increases in nitrogen loadings associated with population growth. Empirical and mechanistic models developed for TBNEP estimate increases in nitrogen loadings of about 17 tons per year from all sources, an amount that represents less than one-half percent of present-day levels.

Local government and agency partners in the Tampa Bay NEP anticipate signing an agreement in early 1998 pledging to carry out specific actions needed to "hold the line" on nitrogen loadings. The agreement will include each partner's responsibility for meeting nitrogen management goals, and a timetable for achieving them. How those goals are reached will be left up to the individual communities as defined by them in their Action Plans, to be finalized later in 1998.

ESTUARINE WETLAND RESTORATION GOALS

TBNEP participants have also agreed to a watershed strategy for coastal habitat restoration and protection that goes further and will accomplish more for Tampa Bay than existing "no net loss" goals for wetlands. More than 20% of the bay's saltwater wetlands have been lost to development (e.g. dredging and filling) since the 1950s. Development has exacted an especially heavy toll on the oligohaline portions of the bay's freshwater tributaries: almost 40% of the 1950s acreage has been lost. Oligohaline

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areas provide critical nursery habitat for numerous species of fish and invertebrates in the Tampa Bay estuary.

A strategy to "restore the historic balance" of the key emergent wetland plant communities focuses bay-wide efforts on two elements: 1) bay tidal stream habitats are given restoration priority; and 2) all remaining emergent marine and estuarine wetlands not currently under protection from development are identified as priority acquisition or conservation easement areas.

SETTING MEASURABLE GOALS AND TARGETS

Three elements appear to be critical for the development of measurable targets:

- Participants must agree that the selected goals and targets are "worthy" of their long-term commitments;
- The technical basis for target development must be recognized by participants as valid;
- Participants in the target development must be willing to work together and negotiate hard decisions needed to reach consensus.

Setting agreed-upon *measurable* goals and targets for Tampa Bay has been the single most important element of the program. The studies and data collection efforts needed to define specific targets and management strategies to reach those agreed-upon goals were then much more easily defined and justified. Presentations to policy-makers and the public are centered around defining the most effective ways to meet these agreed-upon goals, providing a needed focus for a

complex mix of technical and public outreach projects.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CCMP IN TAMPA BAY

Implementation of actions to meet agreed-upon habitat restoration and protection goals in Tampa Bay will take a cooperative effort by local, state and federal governments as well as community efforts by citizens and volunteers. In Tampa Bay, the framework has been developed for significant improvements and protection of critical resources. Continued cooperation and community involvement, coupled with careful monitoring of progress towards goals, will be critical for successful implementation and ultimately, the restored bay envisioned by all participants.

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