



2013 Implementation Progress Report

Eelgrass Management Plan for the Peconic Estuary

**Submitted to:
Peconic Estuary Program Management Committee
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**Prepared by:
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INTRODUCTION

The “Eelgrass Management Plan for the Peconic Estuary” was adopted and finalized in June 2009. In an effort to ensure the Peconic Estuary Program (PEP) meets the objectives outlined in the Plan and implements the management actions and action steps detailed in the Plan, the PEP Natural Resources Subcommittee (NRS) has committed to track its implementation. The NRS develops and submits an annual Implementation Progress Reports (IPRs) to the Peconic Estuary Program (PEP) Management Committee. This ensures proper accounting and tracking of implementation progress and provides an adaptive and timely mechanism for notifying the Management Committee of new priorities, needs, and recommendations. The following is a brief assessment of actions taken from June 2012 to June 2013.

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

1. Seagrass Protection Act Bill

(Action Step 1.1.3)

As noted in last year’s report, the Seagrass Protection Act, which authorizes the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation to adopt rules and regulations to regulate the protection and conservation of seagrasses, was signed into law by the Governor. In order to preserve and expand New York’s seagrass, this law may restrict activities that may threaten seagrass areas, such as mechanically powered fishing gear, and grant the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) the authority to develop and adopt a seagrass management plan to further protect at risk areas. This law takes effect in 150 days after July 31, 2012.

2. NYSDEC Seagrass Coordinator Position

(Action Step 1.1.3)

Stemming from the Seagrass Protection Act, NYSDEC is in the process of hiring a Seagrass Coordinator to manage NYCDEC’s interests in seagrass management. This position will be a contract position funding through Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commissions. This staff person will be housed within the Bureau of Marine Resources, Marine Habitat Protection Section.

3. FY2012 National Estuary Funds

(Action Steps 4.2 and 5.3.1)

As identified last year, approximately \$80,000 of the annual funds available to the PEP, have been identified for use to further investigate the interactions of light and eelgrass survival (bio-optical model). These funds will also be used to help narrow the determination of acceptable nitrogen levels for eelgrass survival within the Peconic Estuary. These funds have been appropriated and a *Request for Proposals* is being developed for **“Development of Bio-optical Model and Refined Site Suitability Model to Enhance Eelgrass Protection and Restoration Efforts”**

4. Benthic Mapping of Submerged Aquatic Vegetation

(Action Steps 3.1 and 5.1)

As noted last year, Suffolk County has re-programmed benthic mapping funds so an aerial survey for Submerged Aquatic Vegetation (SAV) can be completed for the Peconic Estuary. This survey was delayed and has been re-scheduled for the fall of 2013. This effort does not

preclude the NYSDOS effort to aerially survey the Peconics and South Shore. A current assessment of the distribution eelgrass beds is an integral part of managing eelgrass populations.

5. Ongoing - 2013 Association of Marine Industries (AMI) Boater's Guide

(Action Steps 2.1.2 and 2.1.3)

The Peconic Estuary Program worked cooperatively with the AMI to include information on the value of eelgrass and how best to protect eelgrass while boating in the published and distributed 2013 Boater's Guide. 12,500 AMI Boater's Guides are published annually and distributed to water dependent business. They, in turn, are made available to the boating public at water access points. The Guide is available online this year at <http://www.boatli.org/pdf/ami-boaters-guide.pdf>

6. Ongoing - 2010 PEP Mini Grant: Group for the East End & Southampton Town Trustee Eelgrass Educational Brochure

(Action Steps 2.1.2 and 2.1.3)

The Peconic Estuary Program selected the Group for the East End (GFTEE) and Southampton Town Trustees to receive a 2010 mini grant. Cooperatively, GFTEE and the Southampton Trustees developed a brochure which details what eelgrass is, why it's important, the multiple threats to eelgrass, and actions people can take to protect the species. Efforts will be coordinated with other Peconic municipalities, stakeholders, and industries to allow for distribution throughout the entire Peconic watershed. This brochure can be made available at access sites/points, sent to license and permit holders, and made available at other public venues.

7. Ongoing - East End Public Radio Spots on Eelgrass

(Action Steps 2.1.3)

The Peconic Estuary Program originally funded a short radio spot in 2010, narrated by Chris Pickerell of Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County, which hit the airwaves on WLNG, WRIV, WEHM and WBAZ in March 2010 and continues to run in 2012. It is expected to reach 1.5 million listeners.

"Voices of the Bays - East Enders protecting and restoring Long Island's Peconic Bays

Hi I'm Chris Pickerell, eelgrass program manager for Cornell Marine, speaking on behalf of the Peconic Estuary Program. The Peconic Estuary is an amazing ecosystem which is home for a wide variety of species. Eelgrass, an underwater plant species, is as important to the bay as trees are to our environment. In fact seagrass habitats are some of the most biodiverse communities on earth. Eelgrass provides habitat and food for many commercial species including bay scallops, it can improve water quality by extracting nutrients, producing oxygen, slowing currents, and reducing erosion. Unfortunately we have seen drastic declines in the abundance of eelgrass and eelgrass beds in the Peconic Estuary, so please be extra careful not to disturb any underwater plants, by walking, boating, or anchoring on or near them. For more information please visit the Peconic Estuary Program's website at www.peconicestuary.org."

8. Ongoing - Eelgrass and Groundwater Interaction Research and Monitoring

(Action 4.2)

The New York State Seagrass Task Force has funded research to investigate submerged groundwater discharge and eelgrass interactions in addition to limited herbicide toxicity research. The Peconic Estuary Program has also funded additional, expanded groundwater

and eelgrass interaction monitoring at beds monitored under the Peconic Estuary Program Long-Term Eelgrass Monitoring Program. Results and data are available yet.

9. Ongoing - Light and Temperature Loggers

(Action 4.2)

Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County has commenced and expanded their research using light and temperature loggers to research and to evaluate sustainable levels for eelgrass growth and survival. These results are including in the annual Eelgrass Monitoring Reports.

10. Lake Montauk Restoration Effort

(Action 5.3)

The Town of East Hampton, with guidance from Cornell Cooperative Extension, decided to try a small eelgrass planting program in Lake Montauk on a piece of underwater property. The project will use several different methods including the latest employed by Chris Pickerell of CCE.

SHORTCOMINGS & CHALLENGES

1. Eelgrass Inventory

(Management Action 3.1)

The last comprehensive eelgrass survey was completed using 2000 aerials. The next survey, funded by New York State Department of State (NYS DOS), is slated to occur in 2013. Recommendations are to conduct inventories every two (2) years. PEP has funded a survey but is still trying to complete an aerial survey of the Peconic Estuary.

2. Timely reporting and availability of annual PEP Long-Term Eelgrass Monitoring Reports

(Management Action 3.3)

This information and data is critical to responding to new stressors and threats. Annual monitoring reports are posted and archived on the PEP website. Due to the contracting process, the reports are delayed about one (1) year, which is an improvement over last year.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. As reported in previous years, it is a high priority to conduct a new eelgrass inventory. The PEP sponsored effort should be encouraged so a survey is completed as soon as possible.
2. Support the hiring of a NYSDEC Seagrass Coordinator and reach out to partner with this staff person. The coordinator should continue the effort to establish Seagrass Management Areas and develop stakeholder-drive Seagrass Management Area Plans.

3. Ensure that East End elected officials, stakeholders and government agencies understand the importance and have enough information to further educate, engage, and foster local implementation of management actions in conjunction with all involved partners.
4. Continue all ongoing efforts, including implementation of the new projects and initiatives outlined under the “Major Accomplishments” heading.

IMPLEMENTATION TRACKING TABLE

Below, is an Implementation Tracking Table which reports progress made under each objective, management action and action step in the “Eelgrass Management Plan for the Peconic Estuary” during the period of June 2012- June 2013.

Eelgrass Management Plan for the Peconic Estuary: Implementation Tracking Table

Objective 1: Enhance protection of existing and future eelgrass beds from physical disturbances.	June '12-June '13 Progress
<p>Management Action 1.1: Identify and promote new protection measures (regulatory mechanisms at all level of government). Particular attention immediately directed to areas where eelgrass beds recently disappeared, such that disturbances can be limited to allow for natural re-vegetation.</p>	
<p>Action Step 1.1.1: Designate appropriate eelgrass and eelgrass habitat areas as "shellfish spawner sanctuaries", "eelgrass sanctuaries", "eelgrass management areas", "habitat management areas" and limit activity in and around said areas. <i>Responsible entity: NYSDEC, Town Board/Trustees</i> <i>Timeframe: Immediate and Ongoing</i></p>	<p>Eelgrass Sanctuaries have been established in Napeague Harbor, East Hampton (East Hampton Trustees, April 2008) and Bullhead Bay, Southampton (Southampton Town Trustees, Dec 2009). Shellfish harvesting and other harmful activities are prohibited.</p>
<p>Action Step 1.1.2: Implement area restrictions, gear restrictions, activity restrictions in and/or near eelgrass. <i>Responsible entity: NYSDEC, Town Board/Trustees</i> <i>Timeframe: Long Term (10 years)</i></p>	<p>Some Towns prohibit churning in eelgrass beds. Some Towns have also created shellfish spawner sanctuaries in/near eelgrass and implement restrictions in those sanctuaries and buffer areas.</p>
<p>Action Step 1.1.3: Adopt new, New York State regulations (legislation if necessary) specific to the protection and conservation of eelgrass. <i>Responsible entity: NYSDEC</i> <i>Timeframe: Long Term (10 years)</i></p>	<p>Seagrass Protection Act bill (S4287A-2012, same as A7988-2012) introduced March 2012, http://open.nysenate.gov/legislation/bill/S4287A-2012. Approved by both houses. Governor signed into law on July 31, 2012.</p>
<p>Management Action 1.2: Identify areas where eelgrass exists and maintenance navigational dredging or excavation activities are needed; in those cases, implement a dredging window and material placement strategy that maximizes eelgrass protection. <i>*Please note that dredging for purposes of increasing flushing may also be beneficial to eelgrass beds. See Management Action 6.3.</i> <i>Responsible entity: PEP NRS, Towns Board/Trustees</i> <i>Timeframe: Short Term (5 years)</i></p>	<p>No substantial progress to report.</p>
Objective 2: Increase stakeholder, user group, and public awareness of eelgrass and the importance of the species in an effort to foster responsible steward-like resource enjoyment.	June '12-June '13 Progress
<p>Management Action 2.1: Build awareness of eelgrass bed locations and the importance of eelgrass through a public education/outreach campaign; special attention to identifying and promoting citizens/stakeholder/user group actions.</p>	<p>NYSDEC is in the process of hiring a Seagrass Coordinator. This position will address most management actions within this section. Hiring is expected within 6 - 12 months.</p>

<p>Action Step 2.1.1: Design and install signs at waterfront public access points, including marinas and boat ramps. <i>Responsible entity: PEP NRS, PEP CAC, NYSDEC, Town Board/Trustees, Marina operators</i></p> <p><i>Timeframe: Immediate and Ongoing</i></p>	<p>No substantial progress to report.</p>
<p>Action Step 2.1.2:</p> <p>Work with boating and fishing associations to promote less harmful practices to eelgrass habitat and incorporate educational materials with boat registrations and fishing, shellfishing and access permits, passes and licenses. <i>Responsible entity: PEP NRS, PEP CAC, NYSDEC, NYS DMV, AMI, Town Trustees, Fishing and Boasting Assoc.</i></p> <p><i>Timeframe: Immediate and Ongoing</i></p>	<p>Included info on the value of eelgrass and how to protect eelgrass in the 2013 AMI Boaster's Guide. GEE/Southampton eelgrass brochure should be included with all permits and licenses.</p>
<p>Action Step 2.1.3:</p> <p>Develop and distribute up-to-date education materials that will improve public understanding of the value, habitat requirements, status, and trends of eelgrass. <i>Responsible entity: PEP CAC, CCE, NY Sea Grant</i></p> <p><i>Timeframe: Immediate and Ongoing</i></p>	<p>Included info on the value of eelgrass and how to protect eelgrass in the 2013 AMI Boaster's Guide. Group for the East End & Southampton Town Trustees produced brochure for all East End Towns to use and distribute.</p>
<p>Objective 3: Build an established, consistent and comprehensive eelgrass inventory program and sentinel monitoring program.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">June '12-June '13 Progress</p>
<p>Management Action 3.1: Perform eelgrass inventories and mapping efforts in the Peconic Estuary every two (2) years. <i>Responsible entity: PEP NRS (lead), NYSDEC, NYSDOS, USFWS, CCE</i></p> <p><i>Timeframe: Immediate and Ongoing</i></p>	<p>Last comprehensive survey was completed in 2000. NYSDOS survey has not yet occurred due to contracting delays. PEP has re-programmed mapping funds to attempt an aerial survey of the Peconics in the fall of 2013.</p>
<p>Management Action 3.2: Coordinate efforts with other Long Island seagrass mapping initiatives to support consistency through the New York State Seagrass Task Force. <i>Responsible entity: PEP NRS, NYSDEC, NYS Seagrass Taskforce, LISS, SSEF</i></p> <p><i>Timeframe: Ongoing</i></p>	<p>A new Long Island Sound survey was conducted in 2013. NYSDOS is still trying to schedule a survey of the south shore and Peconics. The PEP has scheduled a survey for fall 2013, weather and conditions permitting. This timeframe might be adequate to get a regional perspective.</p>
<p>Management Action 3.3: Ensure results are reported to and easily accessible by stakeholders, local governments, and other permitting government agencies in the Peconic Estuary. <i>Responsible entity: PEP Program Office</i></p> <p><i>Timeframe: Ongoing</i></p>	<p>Annual PEP Long Term Eelgrass Monitoring Reports are posted to the PEP website for easy access.</p>
<p>Objective 4: Improve our knowledge and understanding of eelgrass through research initiatives to ensure that efforts to protect and restore resources are successful and effective. [Impacts of climate change and sea level rise are to be addressed under this objective].</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">June '12-June '13 Progress</p>

<p>Management Action 4.1: Establish a Peconic Estuary Program Eelgrass Workgroup to provide a forum for discussion and coordinate with New York State Seagrass Task Force efforts. <i>Responsible entity: PEP NRS</i> <i>Timeframe: Immediate and Ongoing</i></p>	<p>With the current effort by NYSDEC to hire a Seagrass Coordinator, substantial progress should be made in the upcoming year.</p>
<p>Management Action 4.2: Formulate and test hypotheses through research initiatives to identify threats and factors affecting eelgrass existence, health, and restoration efforts. <i>Responsible entity: New PEP Eelgrass Workgroup, NY Sea Grant, TNC, SUNY</i> <i>Timeframe: Ongoing</i></p>	<p>The NYS Seagrass Task Force has funded several investigations and studies in the Peconics- submerged groundwater discharge characteristics and how they may affect eelgrass, and herbicide toxicity to eelgrass. PEP funded additional groundwater work and installation of light and temperature loggers. TNC funding regional Genetic Diversity and Multiple Stressors research project. Results TBD.</p>
<p>Management Action 4.3: Implement an adaptive eelgrass management and restoration program reflective of research results, conclusions and recommendations. <i>Responsible entity: PEP NRS, New PEP Eelgrass Workgroup and all partners</i> <i>Timeframe: Ongoing</i></p>	
<p>Objective 5: Increase eelgrass bed abundance and density through physical restoration efforts.</p>	<p>June '12-June '13 Progress</p>
<p>Management Action 5.1: Assess the current quantitative restoration goal (a 10% increase in current acreage in 10 years) and set a new goal, if applicable, using the new 2009 Peconic Eelgrass Inventory and level of restoration success in the Peconic Estuary as justification. <i>Responsible entity: New PEP Eelgrass Workgroup</i> <i>Timeframe: Short Term (5 years)</i></p>	<p>No substantial progress to report.</p>
<p>Management Action 5.2: Develop an up-to-date Peconic Estuary eelgrass restoration tracking database (past and current) to identify restoration test plot and full scale restoration attempts, locations, restoration method used, results, etc.. <i>Responsible entity: New PEP Eelgrass Workgroup, CCE</i> <i>Timeframe: Short Term (5 years) and Ongoing</i></p>	<p>CCE has posted this info on www.SeagrassLI.org. Other restoration attempts (some successful, though most not) are included in the Peconic Estuary Program Completed Habitat Restoration Project Inventory.</p>
<p>Management Action 5.3: Implement restoration efforts.</p>	
<p>Action Step 5.3.1: Continue to use and refine the Peconic Eelgrass Restoration Site Suitability Index Model to identify and prioritize potential restoration locations. Adapt the model on an as needed basis as additional information becomes available (e.g. light logger data) and technologies evolve. <i>Responsible entity: CCE (lead), New PEP Eelgrass Workgroup</i> <i>Timeframe: Ongoing</i></p>	<p>Ongoing effort through CCE. The Town of East Hampton will try to restore a small section of Lake Montauk using techniques and guidance from CCE. http://counties.cce.cornell.edu/suffolk/gis/sampleProject1.html</p>

<p>Action Step 5.3.2: Continue to monitor success of restoration efforts. <i>Responsible entity: CCE, Towns</i> <i>Timeframe: Ongoing</i></p>	Ongoing effort through CCE.
<p>Action Step 5.3.3: Identify and undertake new restoration efforts based upon results of restoration site monitoring. <i>Responsible entity: New PEP Eelgrass Workgroup, CCE, Towns</i> <i>Timeframe: Ongoing</i></p>	Ongoing effort through CCE.
<p>Objective 6: Ensure the existence of water quality conditions necessary for conserving, maintaining, and restoring eelgrass.</p>	June '12-June '13 Progress
<p>Management Action 6.1: Reduce and minimize pollutant generation within the Peconic Estuary watershed.</p>	
<p>Action Step 6.1.1: Implement regulatory and voluntary measures and initiatives to reduce nutrient pollution and create a balanced nutrient regime. These may include: turf grass (including golf courses) and landscape fertilizer management; onsite wastewater disposal system management (e.g., inspections, mandatory upgrades of substandard systems, and incentives); the use of new nitrogen removing technologies and alternative uses for Sewage Treatment Plant (STP) effluent; Clean Air Act standards to minimize nitrogen loadings from atmospheric deposition; implementation of the Peconic Nitrogen Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL); implementation of the NYSDEC Municipal Separate Storm Sewer Systems (MS4s) stormwater permit; agricultural stewardship activities; open space preservation; and shellfish restoration initiatives. <i>Responsible entity: Private land and property owners (including homeowners, golf courses, agricultural operators), SCDHS, Towns, STPs, NYSDEC, USEPA</i> <i>Timeframe: Ongoing</i></p>	PEP is implementing the Nitrogen TMDL and funding agricultural stewardship activities in nitrogen impaired watersheds. All Peconic Towns and Villages are now permitted under the MS4 stormwater permit. Suffolk County is implementing its fertilizer reduction law/campaign and PEP's nutrient mgmt challenge for golf courses. The PEP will be fully assessing TMDL implementation and analyzing groundwater nitrogen data.
<p>Action Step 6.1.2: Implement regulatory and voluntary measures and initiatives to reduce toxic pollution. These may include: pesticide and herbicide management; agricultural stewardship activities; and implementation of the NYSDEC Municipal Separate Storm Sewer Systems (MS4s) and Industrial Multi-Sector stormwater permits. <i>Responsible entity: Private land and property owners (including homeowners, golf courses, agricultural operators), Towns, NYSDEC</i> <i>Timeframe: Ongoing</i></p>	When available, current herbicide toxicity research results may require additional pesticide/herbicide mgmt efforts.
<p>Management Action 6.2: Reduce and intercept stormwater and urban runoff.</p>	
<p>Action Step 6.2.1: and infiltration technologies. <i>Responsible entity: Towns, private property owners, NYSDEC, NYSDOT, SCDPW</i> <i>Timeframe: Ongoing</i></p>	Ongoing.

<p>Action Step 6.2.2: Incorporate the use of Low Impact Development (LID) practices, including but not limited to conservation landscaping, rain gardens, permeable pavements, and green roofs, into new and existing development. <i>Responsible entity: SC Planning, Towns, private property owners, PEP</i> <i>Timeframe: Ongoing</i></p>	<p>Ongoing. PEP to be funding FY11 demo Conservation Landscaping Rebate Program.</p>
<p>Management Action 6.3: Protect and restore vegetated buffers, wetland, and open space. <i>Responsible entity: Towns, private property owners, NYSDEC, Suffolk County, TNC</i> <i>Timeframe: Ongoing</i></p>	<p>Ongoing. PEP's 2009 Habitat Restoration Plan is being implemented. PEP funding conceptual habitat restoration design plans for 10 listed sites.</p>
<p>Management Action 6.4: Explore and investigate, on a case-by-case, as needed basis, the use of inlet maintenance dredging to increase flushing capacity to improve water quality conditions for eelgrass. <i>*Please note that dredging activities may also be harmful to eelgrass beds. See Management Action 1.2.</i> <i>Responsible entity: New PEP Eelgrass Workgroup</i> <i>Timeframe: Short Term (5 years)</i></p>	<p>PEP held a separate Dredging Meeting in 2010. A summary and results report is forthcoming.</p>
<p>Objective 7: Minimize and mitigate the negative effects from the construction of new and previously placed docks and other shoreline stabilization structures including but not limited to bulkheads, seawalls, groins, and jetties in and around eelgrass beds or in areas where restoration or re-colonization is likely. [Sea level rise is addressed under this objective].</p>	<p>June '12-June '13 Progress</p>
<p>Management Action 7.1: Minimize the effect of docks and other SSS on sensitive eelgrass beds through existing permitting processes or other regulatory measures, including but not limited to a restoration mitigation strategy, promoting dock construction (or reconstruction) that allows for maximum light penetration, a no-net increase policy, and, if possible a net decrease policy. <i>Responsible entity: NYSDEC, Towns, TNC, public and private waterfront businesses/owners</i> <i>Timeframe: Ongoing</i></p>	<p>Ongoing.</p>
<p>Objective 8: Prevent, if possible, and minimize shading and other negative impacts associated with the onset of future harmful algal blooms and Brown and Red Tide episodes.</p>	<p>June '12-June '13 Progress</p>
<p>Management Action 8.1: Support existing and expand Brown Tide monitoring, research, and management initiatives to help identify environmental factors responsible for blooms. Implement initiatives to prevent and alleviate the effects of Brown tide blooms, including but not limited to nutrient management plans (*See Management Objective 6). <i>Responsible entity: NY Sea Grant, SUNY, SCDHS, PEP</i></p>	<p>Ongoing.</p>

Timeframe: Ongoing

Management Action 8.2:

Support existing and expand phytoplankton and other harmful algal species monitoring, research, and management initiatives to help identify environmental factors responsible for blooms. Implement initiatives to prevent and alleviate the effects of phytoplankton and other harmful algal species blooms, including but not limited to nutrient management plans (*See Management Objective 6).

Responsible entity: NY Sea Grant, SUNY, SCDHS, PEP

Timeframe: Ongoing

Ongoing.