



February XX, 2022

The Honorable Matt Cartwright, Chairman
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies
H-310 The Capitol
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Robert Aderholt, Ranking Minority Member
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies
1036 Longworth House Office Building
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Cartwright and Ranking Member Aderholt:

The undersigned members of the Choose Clean Water Coalition request continued support for programs that are essential to maintaining a healthy and vibrant Chesapeake Bay and a strong regional economy that is dependent on the Bay's resources. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has a strong and long-term presence in the Chesapeake Bay area, and its Chesapeake Bay Office coordinates their efforts with other federal agencies, state and local partners, and users of the resource.

The programs that are run and/or coordinated by NOAA's Chesapeake Bay Office (NCBO) are critical for the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem and for its users and residents. These programs provide the science and management assistance necessary for those whose livelihood is to ply the Bay's waters for fish, crabs, and oysters. Hundreds of thousands of people also fish recreationally in the Bay every year and to the millions boat, paddle, and view wildlife in the region.

The NCBO provides NOAA with a strong presence in the region, and through NCBO's regional expertise and cooperative engagement with other federal agencies and the states, provides added value for the agency, even in areas not directly under their control. For example, NCBO can help NOAA with funding allocations, which is particularly relevant with the \$400 million of fish passage money that was appropriated by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. NCBO can help NOAA identify projects in the 64,000 square mile Chesapeake watershed – much of it far from NOAA's usual coastal jurisdiction.

NCBO is critical for a wide array of audiences, from students learning about science with hands-on experiences, to providing local governments and residents along the shore with the latest information to prepare for coastal flooding and hurricane emergencies. NCBO also provides support around the watershed to address climate change and resiliency, flooding and environmental education.

Utilizing sound science in the management of Chesapeake Bay resources is critical for our regional economy. We request the following funding levels in Fiscal Year 2023:

Department of Commerce

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration - National Marine Fisheries Service – Habitat Conservation and Restoration – Chesapeake Bay Office (NCBO) - \$10.3 million

Chesapeake Bay Office (NCBO) - \$10.3 million

The NCBO was established by Congress in 1992 to provide resources, technical assistance and coordination through two branches: 1) Ecosystem Science and Synthesis Program - applied research and monitoring in fisheries and aquatic habitats; synthesis, and analysis to describe and predict Bay ecosystem processes; and technical assistance to Chesapeake Bay decision makers; and 2) Environmental Literacy and Partnerships Program - development of K-12 and higher education environmental science education programs; strategic partnerships with the Chesapeake Bay Program and other government, university, and nonprofit partners; and delivering NOAA products, services, and programs to targeted audiences.

The NCBO's programs play a key role in implementing the Chesapeake Bay Agreement among the states and is critical to ensuring that commitments are met to:

- restore native oyster habitat and populations in 10 tributaries by the year 2025;
- ensure students graduate with the knowledge and skills to protect and restore their local watershed;
- sustain a healthy blue crab and striped bass (rockfish) population;
- maintain a coordinated watershed-wide monitoring and research program; and
- adapt to climate change, including sea level rise and flooding.

The FY21 enacted levels for all six categories of funding for NCBO totaled \$9.166 million. The specific breakdown of our FY23 request of \$10.3 million for the NCBO is as follows:

Oyster Restoration - \$3.4 million

The Chesapeake Bay oyster population is less than one percent of historic levels and the ecosystem functions associated with oyster reefs, including fish habitat and nitrogen removal, are similarly diminished. NCBO continues to restore entire tributaries with self-sustaining oyster populations and to measure the resulting ecosystem benefits. NCBO works with federal, state, and private partners to plan and implement this tributary-scale restoration in both Maryland and Virginia.

Studies by Morgan State University found that the economic multipliers associated with commercial and recreational fishing in three restored tributaries of the Choptank River are valued at \$13 million annually for newly restored reefs and \$26 million annually once those reefs mature. In addition, research conducted by the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science and the Virginia Institute of Marine Science in one of these tributaries, Harris Creek, found the reefs there are removing nitrogen and phosphorous from the water, providing a service valued at more than \$3 million annually. Research by NOAA has also found correlations between clearer water and increased submerged aquatic vegetation growth in areas where large-scale oyster restoration has occurred when compared to similar unrestored areas. Protecting the existing restoration sites will allow these benefits to accrue and new restoration will enhance these benefits in more tributaries.

Funding for oyster restoration in the Chesapeake is critical to the overall ecosystem health of the Bay. We urge you to provide \$3.4 million to help restore this keystone species so important to the Bay and the region.

Environmental Education and Literacy - \$3.0 million

NCBO encourages and supports efforts in K-12 and higher education to develop and implement comprehensive environmental literacy programs throughout the entire six-state and the District of Columbia Chesapeake Bay watershed. NCBO runs the nationally recognized Bay Watershed Education and Training Program (B-WET) - a competitive grant program for hands-on watershed education for students and teacher training to foster stewardship of the waters of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. B-WET's national funding level had steadily eroded over a decade until a small increase in the past couple of years. We are requesting a modest increase for FY23. Our \$3 million request is part of the larger national B-WET funding from the NOAA Office of Education and we encourage you to continue to restore funding to this successful and renowned program.

Environmental Literacy and Partnerships - \$1.0 million

Habitat conservation and environmental literacy programs focused on catalyzing change at the local level are strongest and most efficient when done in partnership with knowledgeable local organizations and the stakeholders and communities that are most affected. NCBO builds and supports cross-sector partnerships focused on increasing local capacity to address habitat conservation and environmental literacy issues, including supporting shared planning and providing critical training. This community-based approach creates sustainable efforts and also supports B-WET programs.

Fisheries Science - \$1.4 million

Chesapeake fisheries contribute significantly to the economy and culture of the region. In 2021, the blue crab abundance was 282 million crabs, a below average total for the past 32 years. Striped bass (rockfish) have considerably declined in recent years and Maryland, Virginia, and the Potomac River Fisheries Commission are all looking at additional harvest restrictions. Rockfish remain the most popular commercial and recreational finfish in the Bay, generating roughly \$500 million in economic activity related to fishing expenditures, travel, lodging, and so on each year – but the future is uncertain. NCBO works with top academic institutions to provide science used to sustainably manage commercially and recreationally valuable species. Slowly eroding budgets have hampered these efforts leaving NCBO without a single fishery biologist on staff. In addition, NCBO has the expertise and regional partnerships to help NOAA best utilize any Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act fish passage funding for critical habitat work in the region.

Chesapeake Bay Interpretive Buoy System (CBIBS) – \$1 million

Weather and water conditions on the Chesapeake Bay are constantly changing. It is imperative that monitoring systems are in place to provide high quality data to understand, forecast, and develop decision support applications that aid maritime commerce, safety, and fishing activities. CBIBS is maintained by NCBO and relays near real time weather and water information to the National Weather Service, boaters, pilots, and researchers. This is the only system monitoring wind and waves together in the mainstem of the Bay. In addition, CBIBS plays a crucial role monitoring key aspects of the Bay's health. Data from the buoys are combined with satellite data to track harmful algal blooms, monitor sediment plumes spilling into the Bay following storms, measure oxygen levels important to fish

throughout the year and to forecast the distribution and severity of dangerous bacteria – information that is critical to successful aquaculture operations.

Climate and Resiliency - \$500,000

NOAA and the U.S. Geological Survey have the lead for implementing the climate resiliency goal for the Chesapeake Bay Program partnership. The NCBO maintains a full-time climate resiliency specialist to coordinate all climate activities across the Chesapeake Bay Program, including activities such as monitoring for the impacts of sea level rise, coastal and upstream flooding, increased storm intensity and their effects on living resources and coastal communities.

Current climate change predictions anticipate significant increases in hypoxia and dead zones in the Chesapeake Bay. NOAA is collaborating with federal and state partners to establish a hypoxia monitoring system. This system, coupled with NOAA's acoustic monitoring array will provide detailed information about the extent and duration of hypoxia in the Chesapeake Bay and how it affects animals like striped bass, blue crabs and oysters. We urge you to increase funding for these critical activities in FY23.

Thank you for your consideration of these very important requests to maintain funding for programs that are critical to the health of the Chesapeake Bay and its natural resources. Please contact Peter J. Marx at 410-905-2515 or Peter@ChooseCleanWater.org with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,