

# APNEP Equity Strategy

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## Equity Strategies for the Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Partnership to meet the goals of Presidential Executive Orders 14008 and 13985

(October 3, 2023, 4<sup>th</sup> Revision)

Approved by  
EPA Headquarters  
on November 29, 2023

*The purpose of this document is to establish guidance to ensure that the Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Partnership (APNEP) in reviewing potential activities and projects that use 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (P.L. 117-58)/ Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) funds through the lens of equitable and fair access to the benefits from environmental programs for all communities. The tracking of BIL funds will also be guided by this strategy.*

*These strategies outline how BIL funds will be used to sustain and increase investments in disadvantaged communities (including tribal communities), and the benefits that flow to them. These strategies are intended to meet the goals of President Biden’s Executive Orders 14008 and 13985 – Justice40 and EPA’s Equity Action Plan respectively.*

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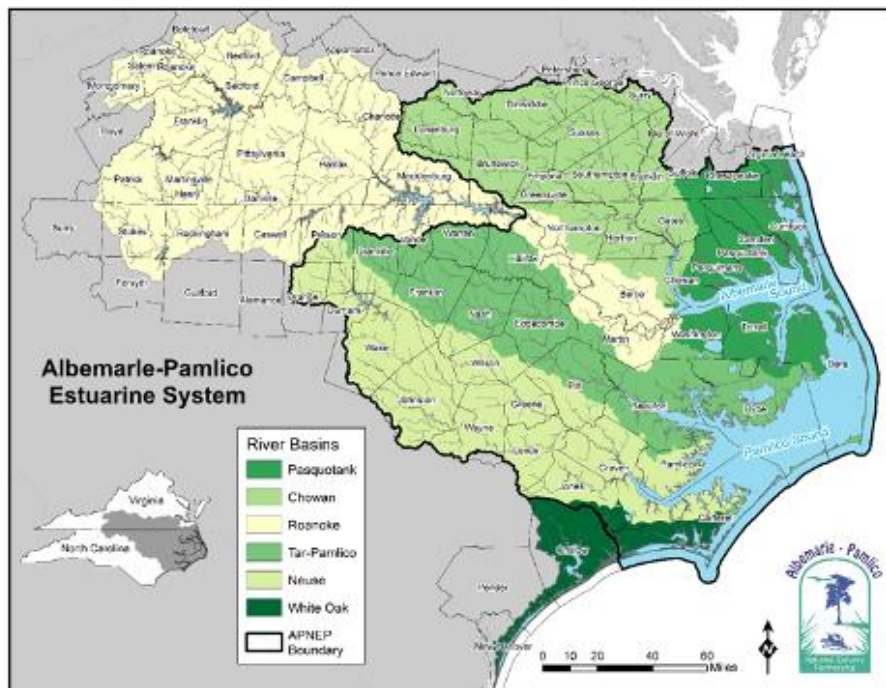
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1. Governance Overview

**Overview**

The Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Partnership (APNEP) has the largest management region of all the 28 National Estuary Programs. Covering approximately 7,530 square kilometers (2,900 square miles) in Virginia and North Carolina, the waters of the system comprise the second largest estuarine system on the East Coast of the United States, exceeded in area by only the Chesapeake Bay. Draining over 30,000 square miles of watershed in two states, it includes six major river basins: Chowan, Neuse, Pasquotank, Roanoke, Tar-Pamlico, and White Oak rivers. Water from 43 North Carolina counties and 38 Virginia counties and cities drain into the Albemarle-Pamlico estuaries.



The Albemarle-Pamlico region has numerous historically under-resourced and underserved counties. The human population within the Albemarle-Pamlico basin in 2010 was 3.9 million with 2.9 million (74%) living in North Carolina and 1 million (26%) living in Virginia. The region is home to some of the most climate vulnerable counties in the nation and is particularly susceptible to sea level rise, flooding, inundation, and changes in storm intensity and frequency.

Identifying, and directly engaging with underserved and underrepresented communities over such a large region presents challenges on many levels. Community readiness and capacity are concerns which should be kept in mind when implementing programs and activities. While we may be able to identify underserved and disadvantaged communities, they may not be willing, ready, or able to collaborate for

a variety of reasons. Therefore, we should be mindful and respectful of these issues when seeking to ensure equitable distribution of funding for implementation of the APNEP Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP).

### **APNEP's Mission and Core Goals**

The Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Partnership pursues its mission of identifying, protecting, and restoring the significant resources of the Albemarle-Pamlico region with guidance and support from its Management Conference, regional partners, and its ecosystem-based CCMP. Our commitment to equitable engagement is inherent in the Ecosystem-based management (EBM) principles upon which the current CCMP was founded. EBM includes consideration of human and natural systems, an adaptive management framework, and meaningful engagement with the region's citizens to find environmental management and policy solutions. To achieve the APNEP mission, three overarching goals have been established in the CCMP:

- **Goal 1:** A region where human communities are sustained by a functioning ecosystem
- **Goal 2:** A region where aquatic, wetland, and upland habitats support viable populations of native species
- **Goal 3:** A region where water quantity and quality maintain ecological integrity

APNEP's goals for our region cannot be achieved alone, therefore we have taken a partnership approach to achieve our mission. As described earlier, the larger Partnership is a key component of APNEP's governance structure. Protection of the Albemarle-Pamlico estuarine system is an enormous undertaking, and the resources directly allocated to APNEP are limited. APNEP seeks to overcome this hurdle by leveraging partnerships among federal, state, and local government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academia, and the public to make significant improvements for the sounds. The influx of BIL and other federal funding presents opportunities the Partnership has not had over the past few decades. As a result of its broad reach, APNEP is well positioned to fill gaps and identify synergies among its partners to support CCMP implementation.

### **NEP Governance**

The Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Partnership (APNEP) is a component of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) National Estuary Program. It was one of the first programs established under amendments to the Clean Water Act in 1987. APNEP's initial CCMP was ratified by the Governor of North Carolina and approved by the EPA in November 1994. A revised [CCMP](#) was created in 2012 through a stakeholder-driven process with an ecosystem-based management approach.

The Partnership is a cooperative effort currently hosted by the NC Department of Environmental Quality (NC-DEQ) under a cooperative agreement with the EPA. APNEP also works closely with the Commonwealth of Virginia and facilitates implementation of a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) (MOU) among six environmental and natural resources agencies from North Carolina and Virginia to support resource management in the region. The most recent MOU signed in 2020 re-affirmed a 2017 commitment to foster interstate collaboration within the shared waterways of the Albemarle-Pamlico region.

The governance structure consists of three interconnected entities: Management Conference, Staff, and the Partnership at large. The Management Conference consists of three groups of diverse stakeholders (Leadership Council (LC), Science & Technical Advisory Committee (STAC), Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC)) that provide the direction and oversight for APNEP. Members represent individuals and organizations with a stake in the work of the Partnership, including citizens, federal and state agencies, local government, and nonprofit organizations. These committees use a collaborative, consensus-building approach to CCMP implementation that is uniquely tailored to the local priorities and environmental conditions.

The Management Conference is the core for guiding the work of APNEP. It consists of three groups of diverse stakeholders and uses a collaborative, consensus-building approach to implement the CCMP. The Management Conference ensures that the CCMP and its implementation is uniquely tailored to the local environmental conditions and priorities. The initial membership of each of the bodies of the Management Conference was established by [North Carolina Governor's Executive Order #250 \(2022\)](#). The Leadership Council and each of the advisory committees are encouraged to expand their members and fill vacancies to meet programmatic goals and implement APNEP's [2020 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Statement \(Appendix A\)](#).

Each body establishes its own operating procedures or bylaws. All Management Conference meetings are open to the public and publicized on the APNEP website and other outlets.

### **Leadership Council**

The Leadership Council works with staff, advisory committees, and other groups to advise, support, evaluate, update, advocate for, and guide CCMP implementation. The Leadership Council is the primary guidance body for APNEP and is the ultimate approving body for budget and policy decisions relative to the STAC and CAC activities. The Leadership Council meets generally two to three times a year, though they meet as often as needed to address issues raised by the staff or the advisory committees. An EPA Region IV representative is included as a non-voting, ex-officio member of the Leadership Council.

### **Science & Technical Advisory Committee**

The STAC provides independent advice to the Leadership Council and the CAC on scientific and technical issues, including ecosystem assessment and monitoring in support of CCMP implementation. The membership of the STAC is broad-based and may include scientists and technologists from local colleges, universities, and research institutes as well as technical staff from federal and local agencies, industry, and environmental organizations, with expertise in science and technology relevant to environment and natural resource management in the Albemarle-Pamlico estuarine system. The STAC is currently exploring mechanisms to increase the diversity of its membership.

### **Citizen Advisory Committee**

The CAC works with the Leadership Council and the Science and Technical Advisory Committee on CCMP implementation and meaningful community engagement activities. Committee members serve as liaisons to citizens, agencies, tribes, and relevant parties regarding environmental and natural resource management relevant to CCMP implementation. The Committee works to engage diverse communities and populations in its decisions and represent diverse perspectives within the Management Conference. The membership of the Citizen Advisory Committee is broad-based and may include the following natural resource management interests within the Albemarle-Pamlico estuarine system: local governments; local or regional planning; environmental equity; commerce and industry; education; recreation; tourism; fishing or seafood industry; agriculture; forestry; military; tribal organizations; local, state, or national conservation organizations; soil and water conservation districts; finance; communications and media; local and state agencies; and federal agencies.

### **Partnership**

The Management Conference represents individuals and organizations with a stake in the work of the Partnership, including citizens, federal and state agencies, local governments, and non-government organizations. While some members of the Partnership serve on the Management Conference, others (such as some non-government organizations or associations, and most local governments) are not directly represented. The Partnership consists of numerous individuals and organizations throughout the program area and beyond, who contribute to our work on behalf of the Albemarle-Pamlico Estuarine System that are not a part of the formal Management Conference structure.

Additionally, APNEP convenes ad-hoc teams including its Action Teams and Monitoring Assessment Teams (MATs) to tackle specific issues and topics identified in the CCMP with members of the Management Conference and the Partnership at-large. In addition, steering committees are convened to oversee special projects, these teams assist APNEP in deciding how APNEP should spend its funds to address pressing issues related to each Team's area of expertise. These ad-hoc teams are created and dissolved as necessary to effectively implement APNEP's mission.

### **Staff**

The [North Carolina Governor's Executive Order #250 \(2022\)](#) also states that the Office shall be in the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality to coordinate and facilitate CCMP implementation and support APNEP's mission. It also states the Office shall consist of the Director of the Office along with the requisite staff necessary to meet the needs identified by the Management Conference. Staff receive additional NCDEQ administrative, budget and outreach support, as well as project-based temporary employees, seasonal interns, graduate interns, and fellows. All staff are governed by the rules and regulations regarding North Carolina State employees.

It is critical that APNEP remains a trusted facilitator, convenor, collaborator, and neutral source of sound scientific information. As such, APNEP follows ethics and public transparency protocols established by the State of North Carolina under its host the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality. Additionally, to avoid conflict, Management Conference members are reminded to identify potential personal or organizational conflicts of interest at the beginning of each meeting. Recusal is required when discussing funding for an organization with whom a Management Conference member is associated or has a conflict of interest. When APNEP offers Requests for Proposals or develops contracts it follows the federal grant requirements and the appropriate rules and regulations set by the State.

Staff consulted with the Management Conference (LC, STAC, CAC), EPA Regions III and IV, and other partners on the preparation of this Equity Strategy, specifically in the development of definition of disadvantage communities described in Section 2. APNEP will continue to consult with the Management Conference and others throughout its implementation. The Leadership Council approved the initial 2-year BIL workplan October 2022 and Long Term BIL Strategy with Equity Strategy May 2023. With recognition that the Long-Term Strategy is a living document; EPA approved our approach at APNEP's July 11, 2023, Leadership Council meeting with minimal suggestions and clarifications to the Equity Strategy provided via email June 26, 2023. APNEP submitted revisions August 21 noting that some of the suggested edits would require resubmitting the document through the Leadership Council and would be included in the next iteration of the workplan. We resubmitted the document September 19, 2023, based on additional feedback and edits requested by EPA Headquarters September 6, 2023, again on September 29, 2023, and are resubmitting this fourth version on October 3, 2023 based on additional conversations among the regions and Headquarters.

APNEP acknowledges that there are gains to be made in our understanding and approach to equitable engagement and working with disadvantaged and underserved communities, and therefore consider this to be a living document.

Now that this initial overarching guidance has been established, APNEP expects to work most closely with the STAC and the CAC in focusing the use of BIL funds for CCMP implementation. Staff will work through the CAC, STAC, and the Leadership Council to identify CCMP implementation projects that need guidance, leadership, financial support, or administrative support from APNEP for Equity Strategy and BIL Workplan implementation. Projects may either be directly contracted or subject to request for proposals as suitable for the task and under the guidance of the appropriate advisory committee, or other teams and workgroups as appropriate. The CAC or specific ad-hoc groups will evaluate requests and provide recommendations regarding administering BIL funding.

Staff will continue to work with the STAC and other partners to on the Spatial Decision Support Project initiated at a workshop held March 2023 to inform tool selection, tracking, and targeting mechanisms for the use of BIL funds (described further below).

### **Equity and Engagement**

APNEP currently implements a comprehensive [Engagement Strategy](#) for the Partnership, that was initially adopted in 2018 and updated in 2020 by the Leadership Council. The Engagement Strategy

presents a detailed vision for 1) partner engagement, 2) public outreach, and 3) communications. The Engagement Strategy recognizes the Partnership's long history of striving to be an organization that reflects the diverse populations and interests of the watershed. It assesses the structure of APNEP's Management Conference and provides recommendations for the Partnership to improve upon engagement with a variety of community members and stakeholders. The Engagement Strategy will be updated in 2023 to reflect APNEP's effort to update our CCMP during 2022-23, and to support implementation of the BIL Workplan and this Equity Strategy.

In coordination with the Leadership Council, APNEP established a [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Statement](#) in 2020, as shown in Appendix A. The DEI statement accompanies the Engagement Strategy and provides more focused guidelines and a specific set of commitments for Management Conference members and staff to follow. The DEI statement highlights that increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion through our work is integral to our ecosystem-based management perspective, which views human communities as a vital component of the overall ecosystem.

The DEI Statement includes specific commitments that APNEP is in the process of implementing. A key mechanism is ensuring that members of our advisory committees and project teams are representative of the broad populations within our region and programmatic boundaries. We are committed to approaching this work in a way that is inclusive of diverse connections to the environment, inclusive of perspectives that may otherwise be unheard, and increases equity through ecosystem protection and restoration efforts. DEI activities are reported annually in the 320 workplan and annual reporting and will also be reported in accordance with guidelines established by EPA for BIL reporting.

In addition, APNEP coordinates closely with our host NCDEQ and other state agencies to ensure consistency with partner programs. North Carolina's Governor's [Executive Order #246](#) prioritizes environmental justice and equity in the implementation of federal and state funds and meaningful engagement with local communities. APNEP coordinates closely with [NCDEQ's Environmental Justice and Equity Program](#) to ensure consistency with Justice40 Guidelines that have been established for NCDEQ programs administering federal funds, and on specific projects as needed. The NCDEQ Title IV and Environmental Justice Coordinator assisted with initial comparisons of various national, regional, and state tools described further below, including the NCDEQ [Community Mapping System](#).

The [NCDEQ EJ Program](#) works to ensure the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Former NCDEQ Secretary Michael Regan established the Secretary's Environmental Justice and Equity Advisory Board, which meets regularly to evaluate environmental programs and policies to protect natural resources, economic interests, and communities so that all North Carolinians have clean air and clean water for today, tomorrow, and future generations to come.

There may be opportunities to leverage [APNEP's Memorandum of Understanding](#) (MOU) between six natural resource and environmental agencies in North Carolina and Virginia. In 2020, Virginia passed the Commonwealth's Environmental Justice Act to integrate environmental justice into Virginia Law and state actions. The Act established that the policy of the Commonwealth is to promote

environmental justice as defined in the bill, and to ensure that environmental justice is carried out throughout the Commonwealth. Virginia has a [Council on Environmental Justice](#) staffed by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality [with a regional coordinator in the Tidewater office which covers the majority of the AP region](#). Through implementation of the [Virginia Coastal Resilience Master Plan](#), the VA Department of Conservation and Recreation is also conducting community outreach efforts by identifying vulnerable communities historically subjected to flooding and natural hazards, and then comparing those identified areas that exhibited moderate and high social vulnerability and flood exposure. APNEP will work through these agencies, advisory boards, and our Management Conference to implement this Equity Strategy and strengthen efforts to benefit underserved communities in the shared waterways between our states.

APNEP staff and the Management Conference recognize that there are still gains to be made to increase our partnerships and interactions with diverse populations, interests, and concerns for sound environmental and natural resource management and building resiliency in the Albemarle-Pamlico region. We are committed to engaging communities and stakeholders that are representative of the broader populations within our programmatic boundaries to implement the CCMP and the Partnership's Mission. We will continue to coordinate closely with our Management Conference, and with the Citizen's Advisory Committee to ensure equitable distribution of BIL funds throughout the AP region.

## **2. Definition of Disadvantaged Communities<sup>1</sup>**

### **BIL and Justice40 Challenge**

National Estuary Program (NEP) expenditures for funds received under [Bipartisan Infrastructure Law](#) (BIL) are required to support the national goals of the [Justice40 initiative](#). Each NEP must develop a long-term plan for using the funds to implement their CCMP and include an equity strategy detailing how the NEP will contribute to the national program-wide goal of ensuring that at least 40% of the benefits and investments from BIL funding flow to disadvantaged communities<sup>2</sup>. The strategy will be reviewed prior to awarding FY 2024 – FY 2026 BIL funds and approved by EPA's Assistant Administrator for Water. Upon approval, the EPA will waive the NEP non-federal match/cost-share requirements for the FY 2024 – FY 2026 BIL funds. Once approved, the equity strategy will be included in the BIL long-term plan and must be submitted to the EPA no later than June 1, 2023.

APNEP submitted both the draft Equity Strategy and BIL Long-term Strategy for EPA review May 30, 2023, after LC approval. The August 2023 revisions to both documents incorporated feedback from EPA received June 26, 2023. The September 2023 revision addresses additional feedback and requirements

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<sup>1</sup> There are several related terms used to describe communities facing hardship or who have historically benefitted unevenly from federal funds, including disadvantaged, overburdened, underserved. Under Justice40 EPA is using the term "disadvantaged" for consistency with E.O. 14008 and other programmatic terminologies. EPA notes that this terminology is distinct from "environmental justice" community, which is defined as a community facing disproportionate environmental, public health, and other burdens that reduce quality of life. These terms should not be used interchangeably. Most environmental justice communities are also likely disadvantaged (depending on the criteria set for the latter's definition), but not all disadvantaged communities are environmental justice communities.

<sup>2</sup> Executive Order 14008 uses the phrase "disadvantaged communities," and this term has been used in existing Federal and state programs to prioritize funding for environmental justice. Some community members and advocates prefer alternative terminology, and specifically the use of "overburdened and underserved communities." Until subsequent guidance can address the question of the most appropriate terminology, this memorandum relies on the language used in Executive Order 14008.



received September 6, 2023. The September 29 revision addressed additional substantial suggested feedback and revisions from EPA Headquarters September 28. The October 3, 2023 revisions is being submitted as a final draft that address additional feedback and conversations among regions III and IV, and headquarters. Other feedback received from partners will be included in the next iteration of the BIL Long Term Strategy and annual workplan.

### **Defining Disadvantaged Communities**

Under direction and support of its Management Conference, and consideration of EPA BIL guidance, APNEP developed a definition that is appropriate given our unique program area and communities using demographic indicators, criteria, and tools to define disadvantaged communities. The Management Conference approves of the proposed approach and suggest casting as wide a net as possible to ensure that benefits to communities from BIL funding are maximized to benefit these communities. Thus, the **APNEP defines disadvantaged communities using one or more of the following Geographic Areas and Economic Designations<sup>3</sup>:**

#### **Geographic Areas<sup>4</sup>:**

- **Census tracts** identified by [Justice40 Initiative’s Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool](#) (CEJST);
- **Census blocks** identified by EPA Supplemental Demographic Index (SDI) with a score of 80% in EPA’s [Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool](#) (EJScreen);
- **Census blocks** identified as “Underserved” by the [N.C. Department of Environmental Quality Community Mapping System](#)
- **Proximity to Title 1 Schools:** Any project that is either on the property of a US Department of Education designated Title 1 School (schools where at least 40% of enrollment is from low-income families) or benefits the surrounding community within 3 miles.

#### **Economic Designations:**

For APNEP projects that benefit a town, county, or region-wide population (e.g., a proposal that focuses or benefits disadvantaged populations or local resources), or non-mapped community identified interests or assets (e.g., tribal property or ancestral /cultural sites), additional consideration will be given for the APNEP’s activities, projects, grants, engagement efforts, and technical assistance programs upon approval of the APNEP Management Conference, if it can be shown to meet at least one of the following requirements may also be included in the definition:

- The area is listed in 2023 North Carolina Department of Commerce [Development Tier Designation of I or II](#),

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<sup>3</sup> A variety of demographic attributes are used in the Geographic Area to determine (e.g., language, percent low-income), however race or ethnicity is not used as a factor,

<sup>4</sup> Due to the nature of many watershed-based investments made by NEPs, meaning many investments and projects may fall nearby or downstream but not within populated areas, APNEP aims to use geographically appropriate radiuses around projects within certain geographies of the region to overlay them with census block in and surrounding their areas of focus. APNEP acknowledges that many map-based tools based on country, census tract or block groups do not always capture disadvantaged communities accurate, thus will use the 3-mile radius from a mapped area to be included in defined disadvantaged community.

- The area is classified as an economically distressed or transitional county by the [Southeast Crescent Regional Commission](#).

APNEP will use all these tools to define/identify disadvantaged communities and track community benefits of projects (See Section 6). This approach of utilizing multiple tools was vetted through and approved by our STAC, CAC, and ultimately the Leadership Council May 2023, with consensus on casting a wide a net as possible to ensure that benefits to communities from BIL funding are maximized. Based upon our knowledge of the region and experience working over three decades with a diverse population and socioeconomic landscape, discussions with the Management Conference and other partners to date, APNEP anticipates being able to meet, and possibly exceed the 40% target. Until specific projects have been identified and compared to the baseline with the tools utilized in the proposed definition, it is difficult to develop more realistic numeric targets. More information on tracking is detailed under the Tracking Benefits section of this document.

### 3. Baseline Analysis of Disadvantaged Communities

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The EPA has conducted a baseline analysis of investments in disadvantaged communities for all NEPs using existing National Estuaries Program Online Reporting Tool (NEPORT) data. This analysis uses habitat projects recorded in NEPORT from 2017 to 2021. NEPORT habitat projects are displayed through [NEPmap](#) which, for the purposes of this baseline analysis, is overlaid with the [EJScreen](#) Supplemental Demographic Index layer which is consistent with EPA’s definition of disadvantaged communities as it is written in the NEP BIL Implementation Memo (2 July 2022). The five-factor Supplemental Demographic Index that combines these factors includes:

1. *Percent low-income;*
2. *Percent linguistically isolated;*
3. *Percent less than high school education;*
4. *Percent unemployed; and*
5. *Low life expectancy.*

These demographic indicators can be used to highlight areas where vulnerable populations may be disproportionately impacted. Maps generated in [EJScreen](#) highlight census block groups above the 80th, 90th, and 95th percentiles when compared to the nation, calculated as the average of these demographic indicators. If the Supplemental Demographic Index percentile in a census block group exceeds 80%, it will be identified as a disadvantaged community for the purposes of establishing baselines in each NEP’s equity strategy, and for tracking Justice40 investments and benefits.

Combining [NEPmap](#) with the [EJScreen](#) Supplemental Demographic Index layer results in a visualization of the habitat projects located in disadvantaged communities. EPA analyzed reported information from 2017-2021 on these selected projects to calculate the:

1. Percent and number of NEP habitat projects located in disadvantaged communities,
2. Percent and amount of CWA Section 320 funds invested from habitat projects in disadvantaged communities, and

3. Percent and total project costs invested from habitat projects in disadvantaged communities.

APNEP and EPA are aware that calculating a baseline using only NEPORT habitat projects results in an undercount of the investments NEPs have made in disadvantaged communities. NEPORT was not developed with the intention of tracking or analyzing work done in disadvantaged communities and NEPs have been making progress incorporating equity more thoroughly into their programs for several years. However, this is the only consistent data collected from all 28 NEPs and the only location data that EPA has for an overlay on a map with disadvantaged communities to approximate a baseline.

The NEP BIL funds are covered under the Justice40 Initiative, and the national program has a target goal of ensuring that at least 40% of the investments and benefits from the BIL flow to disadvantaged communities.<sup>5</sup> The purpose of the baseline is to determine the number and percent of recent pre-BIL funds or projects that benefit disadvantaged communities for comparison with the investments and benefits that flow to disadvantaged communities with the influx of NEP BIL funds. Prior to BIL, the NEP was not a covered program under Justice40.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, there is no expectation for NEPs to meet a certain number or percentage of pre-BIL investments in disadvantaged communities for the baseline.

**EPA HQ Baseline National Summary (2017-2021) Results: Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Partnership**

Year	# of Habitat Projects in DCs	Total Habitat Projects	% of Habitat Projects in DCs	Section 320 Funds Invested in DCs through Habitat Projects (\$)	Total Section 320 Funds Used in Habitat Projects (\$)	% of Section 320 Funds Invested in DCs through Habitat Projects	Habitat Project Costs Invested in DCs (\$)	Total Habitat Project Costs (\$)	% of Habitat Project Costs Invested in DCs
2017	10	36	27.78%	0	0	-	3,863,922	12,303,707	31.40%
2018	12	38	31.58%	0	0	-	1,505,960	6,349,453	23.72%
2019	12	73	16.44%	0	0	-	1,241,836	26,427,816	4.70%
2020	5	55	9.09%	0	0	-	644,825	14,987,789	4.30%
2021	16	78	20.51%	0	0	-	903,001	1,525,282,502	0.06%
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>19.64%</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>8,159,544</b>	<b>1,585,351,267</b>	<b>0.51%</b>

DCs= Disadvantaged Communities

<sup>5</sup> See [National Estuary Program Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Funding Implementation Memorandum for Fiscal Years 2022-2026](#), 2022 guidance.

<sup>6</sup> See [Justice40 Initiative Covered Programs List for the Environmental Protection Agency](#), 2022.

## 4. Numeric Target (Justice40)

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### Numeric Target

The EPA requires that each NEPs set a realistic numeric target for activities aiding disadvantaged communities that contribute to achieving a national target of at least 40% of benefits and investments to such communities for the national program over the lifespan of total BIL funds. As noted in Section 2 above, APNEP with direction and support of its Management Conference, and consideration of EPA BIL guidance, developed a definition that is appropriate given our unique program area and communities using a combination of demographic-based geographic areas and economic designations to define disadvantaged communities. **APNEP is setting a numeric target of at least 40% of EPA BIL funding dollars to go towards activities that invest, or benefit areas defined as disadvantaged communities.**

Tracking CCMP implementation activities using the criteria for defining disadvantaged communities will be used to assess the Partnership's progress in meeting this goal. The projects described in the Long Term BIL Strategy designed to assist with project prioritization (including the spatial targeting exercise and community resilience needs assessment), will also assist the identification of underserved communities for prioritization and tracking.

The NCDEQ Title IV and Environmental Justice Coordinator assisted APNEP staff with initial comparisons of the "geographic area" tools (CEJST, EJScreen, and the NC DEQ Community Mapping System) described further in the initial analysis presented in **Appendix B** below. This analysis and advice, and staff knowledge of the unique socioeconomic landscape of our large program area, led APNEP to include additional tools and economic designations used by multiple state agencies and the Environmental Justice advisory boards in our region. The "economic designation" data including Title One Schools was not available as GIS layers in the overlay analysis at the time. In addition, the APNEP STAC held a workshop to review and inform tool selection, tracking, and targeting mechanisms for the use of BIL funds described further below. The Leadership Council has been routinely briefed on Equity Strategy development since EPA guidelines were released. APNEP's approach for the definition of disadvantaged communities to inform this Equity Strategy was presented to the STAC in February, and the LC and CAC for approval in March 2023, with approval of the BIL Long Term Strategy and Equity Strategy May 2023.

Based upon our knowledge of the region and experience working over three decades with a diverse population and socioeconomic landscape, discussions with the Management Conference and other partners to date, APNEP anticipates being able to meet, and possibly exceed the 40% target. In addition, we understand that per the guidance from EPA, the challenge target is across the Nation, and not within individual NEP program areas.

Based upon conversations with the Management Conference and approval of utilizing multiple tools to assist in identifying disadvantaged communities in the region, we are taking the approach of casting as wide a net as possible to ensure that benefits to underserved communities are identified and tracked in accordance with Justice40, EPA, and state guidelines.

### Strengths

APNEP engages citizens and organizations through its Management Conference to ensure a coordinated approach to managing the Albemarle-Pamlico estuarine system. Staff works closely with diverse stakeholder committees whose members include citizens, local business leaders, environmental organizations, and local, state, and federal agencies. By facilitating communication and collaboration among different organizations throughout the region, APNEP seeks to leverage its resources and those of its partners to accomplish more together than any individual organization could alone. This, combined with our ecosystem-based management approach, positions APNEP to identify and fill regional gaps and to address pressing issues confronting the region.

Given the influx of federal funding coming into the region and existing coordination among partners administering these various funds, we are even more confident in the ability to identify projects and initiatives to meet the APNEP 40% target. Staff have been coordinating with partners administering BIL, IRA, ARPA, and other funding sources to better coordinate and leverage these funds to maximize benefits to the regional ecosystem and communities.

### **Challenges**

A primary challenge that has been identified is consideration of meeting the numeric target for ecosystem projects not designed to benefit communities directly, but rather directly protect or restore the estuarine ecosystem and its watersheds with an emphasis on habitat restoration and protection, benefits to fish and wildlife species, and aquatic communities directly. Some projects may be located upstream or adjacent to a community, but provide water quality, community flood resilience, or other ecosystem services and associated benefits to a community outside of the mapped project location.

In addition, many projects may be implemented in remote areas or open waters of the sounds where there is little to no population and do not register on the mapping tools that rely on demographic indices. Examples include oyster cultch restoration or submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) mapping in the sounds themselves, large scale wetland restoration projects, or water quality best management practices on rural agricultural or forestry land. Indirect benefits to adjacent and rural communities may be derived from the ecosystem services provided by these types of projects, but are challenging to quantify, particularly within the duration of a funded project. These include economic benefits to the fishing, agriculture, and tourism industries and resilience co-benefits such as protection from storms and carbon sequestration. More specific examples of indirect benefits will be added as specific projects are identified. Indirect benefits are discussed further below.

As identified earlier and based on recent experience engaging with local governments and communities in the region, lack of capacity and community readiness are challenges that must be considered when identifying and targeting underserved communities. Challenges include lack of environmental/natural resource staff, capacity for existing staff to take on additional project management or grant administration responsibilities, cash flow, comfort with signing legal obligations and contracts that require match, securing match, support from elected officials dealing with more pressing challenges (healthcare, affordable housing, broadband access, poverty), and identification of local champions to advocate for additional resources to support project implementation and future phases. All these concerns lead to potential challenges with being able to identify and implement meaningful projects that benefit underserved communities, despite availability of funding and tools to target underserved areas.

An additional consideration raised by local governments is the initial lack of access, awareness, understanding and ability to position themselves to take advantage of the funding opportunities available. Our partners that have administered both state and federal funding for decades prior to the new funding subject to Justice40 initiatives (e.g., 319/205J, NC Water Resources Development Grant, NC Land and Water Fund), frequently note the lack of applications from the AP region for recurring annual funding programs they manage. At a recent funding forum hosted by partners in the region, multiple participants noted it was overwhelming to track, organize, understand, and distinguish between all the available options, requirements, etc., even with assistance from organization like APNEP and partners, let alone apply for and keep up with contract deliverables and reporting requirements.

### **Indirect Benefits**

To further expand upon consideration of indirect or secondary benefits, another key component is the connection between our mission and the economic well-being of the communities in the region. Some of the additional benefits to underserved communities associated with our work may extend beyond our tracking mechanisms. We believe it should be acknowledged as part of the overarching Equity Strategy that there will be indirect and secondary benefits to communities that rely upon the natural resources of the region, not only for economic, but also social and cultural well-being. APNEP plans to explore ways to leverage new and existing data sources to make the best possible predictions of how indirect benefits may provide direct benefits to underserved communities.

For example an [economic valuation report \(2016\)](#) commissioned by APNEP estimated economic benefits exceeding \$475 million for commercial sectors that depend directly on the region's natural resources, including agriculture, forestry and commercial fishing. In addition, these sectors directly employ approximately 36,000 workers in the region, generating more than \$672 million in wages each year. Benefits to households were measured in terms of outdoor recreational activities and the aesthetic value of natural resources. The report estimates indirect benefits of more than \$3.7 billion from activities such as fishing, hunting, wildlife viewing and visits to national seashores and state parks. Additional indirect benefits such as the removal of air pollutants by tree cover in the watershed were also evaluated and estimated to save \$81 million in human health costs each year. Indirect benefits from BIL funded projects are expected to have similar effects as to those described in the economic valuation report.

As mentioned previously, we anticipate the use of NEPORT data for the baseline that EPA Headquarters developed will present challenges in comparing new projects and developing and tracking metrics associated with the benefits of BIL funds. Not only were many of these projects not created or implemented with benefits to disadvantaged communities in mind, but many were implemented with non-320 funds, are partner led, and developed with different goals and objectives in mind. In fact, many of the projects APNEP has been engaged with that would fit would not have been reported in NEPORT, since community engagement and coordination would not necessarily have included a habitat protection and restoration component that meets the NEPORT reporting requirements. In addition, though all projects reported support CCMP implementation, APNEP may have had varying levels of involvement.

## 5. Key Activities

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### Partnership Priorities

APNEP is currently engaged in strategic planning activities related to updating its CCMP and anticipates publishing an updated version by January 2024. The revised CCMP will serve as an update to the current CCMP and targeted for the calendar years 2023 through 2028. The update is based primarily on direction from the Leadership Council and the STAC leadership determined a series of Strategic Planning meetings held 2020-2023. Based on these discussions, APNEP will focus on the following themes for the next five years with implementation the current CCMP and continued with the revised plan when adopted:

- ❖ Water Quality
- ❖ Submerged Aquatic Vegetation
- ❖ Wetlands
- ❖ Oyster Habitat
- ❖ Community Resilience

These planning discussions included identification of priorities for the BIL funding and establishment of the 5-year BIL workplan that this Equity Strategy will accompany. Actions not prioritized in the update will be opportunity driven, so if communities in the region identify needs other than those identified in the current guidance, the Partnership will still consider those in BIL workplan implementation.

In the 2-year BIL workplan approved by the Leadership Council and submitted to EPA October 2022, staff identified the need for a regional needs assessment to assist staff and the Management Conference in utilizing BIL funding and developing this Equity Strategy. As the funds were received late February 2023, there has not been adequate time for APNEP to coordinate with the Management Conference and other partners to fully identified or develop a request for qualifications or proposals to solicit professional assistance for this task prior to the June 1, 2023, due date for the Equity Strategy. Therefore, we anticipate including the task in the 5-year BIL Workplan and utilizing the results to update the Equity Strategy, which we consider to be a living document as noted earlier. More information is described below:

**Regional Needs Assessment:** APNEP staff believe a regional needs assessment could be utilized to better inform use of the BIL funding to build both ecosystem and community resilience and help with implementation of the equity strategy that will be developed as part of this workplan. (Potential RFQ). A needs assessment could be utilized to inform development of the long-term BIL workplan and flesh out more specific projects to expand upon the example projects identified under the Community Resilience category.

Staff also plan to draw from regional, statewide, local vulnerability assessments being conducted by various partners, in particular the regional resilience effort described below which has focused on the needs of rural, underserved communities. We anticipate working with partners to further refine work that has already been conducted and broader scales and geographic scope to identify targeted areas to benefit disadvantaged communities in the AP region.

Agency designees to APNEP's 2020 Memorandum of Understanding with Virginia (MOU) identified resilience as an overarching theme in its assessment of joint management strategies and activities a) to protect and restore significant resources, b) to improve spawning habitats in shared river basins, c) to protect areas identified as ecologically healthy, and d) to incorporate resilience to climate change impacts and sea level rise in local, state, and regional planning needs. The designees from both states agreed to utilize state and regional planning documents that address these topics and align any recommended activities to meet shared objectives. The designees agreed to utilize the definitions of resilience in the North Carolina Climate Risk Assessment and Resilience Plan and Virginia Coastal Resilience Master Planning Framework as guiding documents.

APNEP will build upon recent statewide and regional resilience planning efforts in Virginia and North Carolina to guide implementation of the CCMP using BIL funds including:

**NC Regional Resilience Planning Support:** APNEP will work with the North Carolina Office of Resilience and Recovery (NCORR), the NC Rural Center, and Regional Councils of Government (COG) to assist with implementation of projects identified during Regions Innovating for Strong Economies & Environment (RISE) program. RISE aims to support resilience primarily in the storm-impacted regions of North Carolina including the majority of the APNEP region. RISE seeks to ensure that rural communities, communities of color, and low-income communities equitably share the benefits of the program and projects that are developed because of RISE. Several CAC members and other partners participate in RISE and already working with staff to identify projects appropriate for BIL funding. Staff will also consider projects through the NC Resilient Coastal Communities Program.

Vulnerability assessments were conducted for each of the COGs participating in the program and project portfolios released in 2022. Several APNEP staff participate in regional teams and have been utilizing the opportunity to better understand regional and community resilience needs. Staff have identified project needs that complement both CCMP and NC Coastal Habitat Protection Plan (CHPP) implementation and can assist communities with building resilience including development of regional water quality sampling programs, regional and county-wide stormwater/watershed plans, inflow and infiltration projects that protect estuarine water quality and coastal habitats, assisting communities with impacts from sea level rise to stormwater and wastewater infrastructure, agricultural best management practices, estuarine shoreline erosion, and dealing with harmful algal blooms. APNEP is working closely with NCORR staff and partners to identify potential projects that the Partnership can champion and potentially fund through BIL. In addition, both NCORR and COG staff participate on the Leadership Council and CAC and can assist with further integrating this approach into this Equity Strategy.

**VA Regional Resilience Planning Support:** Staff will work with the Virginia Planning District Commissions in our region (Hampton Roads, etc.) and the Virginia Rural Center to identify opportunities to align VA needs with the NC RISE program, and other projects that may be implemented at a regional level.



APNEP will work with the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation on the [Virginia Coastal Resilience Master Plan](#) and [Community Flood Preparedness Fund](#) to identify projects and initiatives that the Partnership can support within the AP region. A summary of outreach conducted during regional resilience planning in Virginia can be found [here](#). Staff have recently been engaged in regional resilience project planning and tool development for local governments and communities with Wetlands Watch and the Virginia Institute of Marine Science and will coordinate to identify synergies with those projects and the broader statewide planning efforts.

APNEP will also work with the University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, and Old Dominion University (ODU) to explore utilizing the [Regional Adaptation Feasibility Tool \(RAFT\)](#) for regional resilience planning. Staff will work through current members of the STAC and CAC from these universities to facilitate these discussions. Staff participated in a [National Workshop on Coastal Community Resilience and Social Equity Workshop](#) hosted fall 2022 by ODU and will seek opportunities to incorporate findings from the event into Equity Strategy implementation.

Another project identified in the workplan that could be scoped to better included equity consideration is the Estuarine Spatial Planning Assessment included as part of the Spatial Decision Support project in the BIL workplan:

**Estuarine Spatial Planning Assessment:** Objectives: Improved understanding of water use and projections for climate change related impacts on the regional ecosystem. Description: A comprehensive spatial plan for the Albemarle-Pamlico estuarine system (APES) does not exist, despite the region’s increasing challenges arising from competing multiple uses of estuarine space, declining water quality and vulnerable coastal habitats, and significant threats associated with adverse climate change impacts. Estuarine spatial planning directly aligns with the ecosystem-based management principles endorsed by APNEP’s CCMP. Specifically, an estuarine spatial planning framework requires government support, effective stakeholder engagement, clear goals and objectives, rigorous monitoring and routine assessments, and adaptive management, thereby providing a coordinated and policy-oriented approach to ecosystem-based management that advances the region’s ability to meet current and future demands for ecosystem services from system.

### **CCMP Goals**

APNEP, like other NEPs, has already articulated local environmental priorities within their CCMPs, and the connection between CCMP priorities and these demographically defined disadvantaged communities demonstrates the intersection of NEP environmental and demographic priorities. NEP projects can also benefit disadvantaged communities outside of NEP study areas, and those project investments and benefits should be included toward the Justice40 target when there is information to indicate this connection.

As described earlier, one of the three overarching goals of APNEP’s CCMP is to foster a region where human communities are sustained by a functioning ecosystem. APNEP is incorporating BIL priorities for the focus areas identified by the Leadership Council and Management Conference to date in the CCMP update.

## 6. Tracking Benefits

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APNEP will follow guidelines from EPA and work with the Management Conference to develop tracking mechanisms to ensure consistency with EPA once the guidelines have been received. We do not have any additional known metrics currently. All BIL funded projects will be tracked to assess progress and the efficacy of various strategies we implement for supporting communities who may benefit from APNEP support the most. APNEP staff and Management Conference will seek to employ quantitative approaches that track the direct and indirect benefits of BIL funding, and broadly quantify the proportion of funds that are intended to support disadvantaged communities in the region. All BIL funded projects will support CCMP implementation.

APNEP's STAC held a workshop February 16, 2023, to generate a spatial targeting strategy for Comprehensive Conservation Management Plan (CCMP) and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) project implementation. The objective of this workshop was to develop mapping criteria for use with initial project targeting for three priority areas: disadvantaged communities, Submerged Aquatic Vegetation, and wetlands/living shorelines. The information will be utilized to develop a GIS tool that can be utilized to prioritize project locations and track where funds are spent. During this meeting, the STAC approved APNEP's approach for the tools and tiered approach that will be utilized for the Definition of Disadvantaged Communities. They recommended that APNEP cast as broad a net as possible and utilize all tools and resources to ensure that projects funded through BIL benefit disadvantaged communities. The spatial targeting strategy is included as part of a broader Spatial Decision Support Project described in the BIL Long Term Strategy and Workplan. A steering committee of Management Conference Members from each committee (Leadership Council, STAC, and CAC) was initially convened to oversee project refinement. As tools are developed, the results will be incorporated into this Equity Strategy.

## 7. Stakeholder Engagement Plan

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### Background

APNEP's comprehensive [Engagement Strategy \(2020\)](#) for the Partnership outlines a detailed vision for 1) partner engagement, 2) public outreach, and 3) communications and is available on our [website](#). The Partnership solicits and fosters meaningful community involvement to implement the CCMP. APNEP is committed to establishing and building upon partnerships among diverse stakeholders through inclusive, timely, and consistent community engagement utilizing a collaborative, consensus-building approach. For guidance and implementation of the BIL funds, staff anticipate building upon and incorporating new guidelines, considerations, and elements from this Equity Strategy, the 5-year BIL workplan, and CCMP update into that plan upon approval from EPA. We will work with our Management Conference, partners, and other interested parties during the process.

The DEI Statement includes a commitment to report annually on actions taken to enact the DEI commitments listed in our Annual Work Plan. In addition, our summer 2021 intern developed a

document entitled *Recommendations for Incorporating Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice in APNEP Communications & Outreach*. She interviewed APNEP staff and partners including the NC Office of Environmental Education which assists with the NC-DEQ Diversity and Inclusion committee and conducted online research. Her recommendations included starting with social media and grants. She assisted with diversifying outreach and targeting new audiences for the 2021 Engagement & Stewardship RFP which was released during her tenure. APNEP staff have begun implementing other recommendations including updating website content and will be considering them during the 2023 CCMP revision and BIL Workplan. Staff will include the document in the next update to its Engagement Strategy.

### **Integrating with the Current Engagement Strategy**

We intend to incorporate implementation of this Equity Strategy and BIL workplan with the existing approved Engagement Strategy to better integrate these equity approaches with routine CCMP engagement and implementation efforts. We would like to explore opportunities to integrate and streamline these two plans rather than duplicate effort and confuse implementation approaches.

Ongoing projects such as our Tribal Coastal Resilience Connections and Scuppernong Study projects, specific projects can be used as examples with greater detail to illustrate unique partners/interests/ and timing information that may occur with any given BIL project. The project descriptions for each are included in the BIL Long Term Strategy. We will also coordinate through the NCDEQ Secretary's Environmental Justice and Equity Advisory Board and Virginia Environmental Justice Advisory Council during strategy refinement. We will also coordinate with partners that work with underserved and vulnerable populations as part of their mission such as the NC Office of Recovery and Resiliency, VA Department of Conservation and Recreation, NC Regionals Councils of Government, VA Planning District Commissions, NC & VA Rural Centers, Sea Grant, and numerous other local and regional nongovernmental partners. Many of these organizations are represented on our committees and/or active on externally led teams on which APNEP staff participate.

Considering recent experiences with community engagement, consultation with partners who work closely with communities on climate resilience planning, and input from multiple partners that have reviewed the initial draft of this Equity Strategy, APNEP recognizes the potential benefits of soliciting external professional assistance to further refine and implement its Equity Strategy and be able to identify communities, stakeholder groups, and partners. Our 2-year BIL workplan and draft 5-year BIL workplan have identified projects that can be utilized to implement this Equity Strategy, including the Regional Needs Assessment and Spatial Decision Support Project already described.

We have also proposed allocating funds towards ongoing projects that involve continued coordination with rural, historically underserved local governments and Tribal communities in the program area. In addition, as an outcome of the APNEP's strategic planning efforts, we have been working to expand its engagement and partnerships with local governments in the region.

With assistance from an intern this summer, we have been developing a website to ensure the BIL funding process is transparent and that web-based tools are readily available and accessible (story maps,

GIS layers, links to guidance and tools, etc.) to inform and engage partners on implementation of this Equity Strategy and the BIL workplan.

### **Key Issues**

As noted, APNEP works over a wide program area and engaging directly with communities can be challenging - identifying gaps, needs, and areas to target present challenges in and of themselves. Many efforts are opportunity driven or the result of identifying needs through existing partnerships and activities. Even once communities and projects have been identified, time must be spent to learn unique perspectives and history of engagement in the area, build relationships, and meet communities where they are - listening to what they need and want.

While many local governments in the region recognize the value of their natural resources and linkages to the regional economy and way of life, it can be challenging to persuade elected officials to invest in environmental protection, water quality monitoring, and other resilience protection measures, or support staff volunteering their time on advisory committees, when there are other financial needs and challenges in economically distressed areas unrelated to the environmental and natural resource protection (affordable housing and healthcare, rural broadband access, etc.). This is also a region where many local elected officials do not receive any salary, and rarely have staff trained in and dedicated towards environmental issues and natural resource protection. Many of the regional councils of government, counties, and municipalities may only have one planning professional on staff, if at all. Reaching community groups including faith based and service organizations across such a diverse demographic can also be daunting; where do you start over such a large watershed?

It should be noted that there is also a strong mistrust of government in many of the communities in the region for a number of reasons ranging from underserved or disadvantaged communities not being included in past permitting or facility siting decisions, concerns over the significant acreage of conservation land taken off the tax rolls and no longer available for development, particularly in rural areas with limited economic growth opportunities, and fatigue over extractive research or organizations including “the government” coming in and asking residents to participate and volunteer their time on projects that may not result in a useful end product or solutions that can actually be implemented at the local level.

Therefore, building trust from the beginning, understanding community perspectives, history, readiness, and being flexible—particularly with projects that are intended to be community led, will be a key component in implementing this Equity Strategy. This includes understanding that deliverables and projects may not be completed within contract milestones and agency timelines. Recent examples that staff have been involved with and are learning from are the Scuppernong Study and Tribal Coastal Resilience Connections Project. We hope to learn as we go to assess our role, ability to be effective, and capacity for staff to directly engage in community projects, versus providing funding opportunities for communities to apply for (mini-grant programs, RFPs for targeted focus areas, etc.) or supporting partners that work with local communities. Given the large program area and limited capacity, meaningful engagement of local governments and communities will be an ongoing challenge for APNEP.

**Engagement of Partners and Timing**

The following table (Table 1) of engaged and potential partners below highlights some of noted efforts. For more information, please see more detailed descriptions of proposed projects and potential partners listed in the BIL Long-Term Strategy. The list below is not exhaustive and will be refined as specific projects are identified.

**Table 1: Unique Partners/Communities and Engagement.**

<b>Group/ Partner/Community</b>	<b>Geographic Locale</b>	<b>Type of Engagement Anticipated</b>	<b>Rationale for Engagement</b>	<b>Timing/Regularity of Engagement</b>
Leadership Council	Program Area	Meeting, Planning, Budgeting, Engagement	Guidance and oversight	Quarterly
STAC	Program Area	Spatial Decision Support Project and Tool Development to assist with identifying communities, project prioritization, and tracking Justice 40 implementation. Meeting, Planning, Budgeting, Selection Criteria, Engagement, Implementation, Tracking	Guidance and oversight. Staff anticipate working most closely with the STAC and CAC in focusing the use of funds for CCMP implementation.	Quarterly
CAC	Program Area	Refinement and implementation of Equity Strategy Meeting, Planning, Budgeting, Selection Criteria, Engagement, Implementation, Tracking	Guidance and oversight. Staff anticipate working most closely with the STAC and CAC in focusing the use of funds for CCMP implementation. Assistance identifying communities that may benefit from BIL funds as specific projects are identified.	Quarterly
APNEP Action and Monitoring and Assessment Teams, and ad hoc Project Workgroups	Program Area	Meeting, Planning, Budgeting, Selection Criteria, Engagement, Implementation, Tracking	Guidance, Planning, and oversight	Schedule and timing determined by staff team leads and committee co-chairs
BIL Funding Outreach	Program Area	Utilize spatial equity database and visualization tool by 2023 summer intern to identify census tracts where communities are most likely to meet APNEP's definition of disadvantaged (or identified as underserved, underrepresented, under-resourced or overburdened by the Management Conference) and are most likely to benefit from BIL funding. Expand partnerships to increase awareness of availability of BIL funding for community-led projects, and where projects aligned with focus area (SAV, Wetlands, Water Quality, Resilience, Oyster) benefit new or existing community projects, and/or overlay with census tracts that may benefit from BMPs,	Develop partner, community outreach and social media strategy to help implement this Equity Strategy	Ongoing

		ecosystem protection and restoration activities. Collaborate with partners who directly collaborate with community groups with local knowledge to ensure community and ecological co-benefits.		
NC and VA Environmental Justice Councils, State Title IV and EJ Coordinators, Partners for Environmental Justice, NC Environmental Justice Network, VA EJ Collaborative, other DEIJ groups	Program Area	Best practices for Equity strategy implementation, training on DEIJ issues, equitable and inclusive community engagement, etc. Assistance with Spatial Decision Support Tool development. Membership represents diverse, underserved, and under-represented communities that have historically been excluded from environmental decision-making processes across both states.	Coordination to further refine and ensure implementation of this Equity Strategy. Identify communities that may benefit from BIL funding. Assistance with refining the definition of disadvantaged communities. Assistance with the utilizing The Spatial Equity Toolkit and interpreting the use of tools to identify communities in the AP region. understanding the data contained in.	Ongoing
VA/NC Memorandum of Understanding Implementation	VA/NC Shared waterways: river basins (Roanoke, Chowan, Pasquotank) that flow into Albemarle Sound	Identify projects, coordinate across state lines. APNEP will continue to work through agency designees and regional partners to identify projects that support implementation of APNEP's interagency MOU with Virginia. The designees agreed upon climate resilience as an overarching theme.	Help identify communities in areas that may benefit from BIL funding. Continue to assist established groups such as the Currituck Sound Coalition who have developed outreach strategies to coordinate with regional stakeholders and local governments. Work through the VA Department of Recreation and Conservation who are conducting outreach to communities historically subjected to flooding and natural hazards through the coordinating the VA Coastal Master Plan Working Group.	Ongoing
NC Office of Recovery and Resiliency (NCORR): Regions Innovating for Strong Economies and Environment (RISE) Program (+NC Rural Center, NC Councils of Government (COG))	Six of the nine COG regions in RISE: Albemarle, Eastern Carolina, Mid-East, Kerr-Tar, Triangle J, Upper Coastal Plain	Implement projects that can assist communities with building resilience. Includes development of regional water quality sampling programs, regional and county-wide stormwater/watershed plans, inflow and infiltration projects that protect estuarine water quality and coastal habitats, assisting communities with impacts from sea level rise to stormwater and wastewater infrastructure, agricultural best management practices, estuarine shoreline	Build on established resilience planning program that conducted regional vulnerability assessments in 2022. Help implement project portfolios selected by local communities through a regional stakeholder driven process. Planning, engagement and targeting.	Monthly. APNEP is actively working with NCORR staff to prioritize projects from the regional portfolios and identify regions, communities and local governments that

		erosion, and dealing with harmful algal blooms.		will benefit most from BIL funding.
Harmful Algal Bloom Identification and Prevention Coordination (NCORR, Chowan Edenton Environmental Group, Green Saves Green, NC Sea Grant, Albemarle RC&D, Albemarle Commission, Albemarle Regional Health, NC State Climate Office, NCDWR)	Focus Area: Albemarle Sound watershed (Chowan/Pasquotank River Basins in VA/NC)	Work with federal, state, and local partners to assess knowledge gaps, increase interagency collaboration and commitment to identifying causes and prevention of algal blooms, while increase public awareness and engagement through community workshops and targeted outreach materials.	Continued engagement with partners and communities on reoccurring algal blooms in Albemarle Sound watersheds. APNEP has been working with communities on these issues since algal blooms began reoccurring in the region after two decades.	Weekly
Scuppernong Regional Water Management Study	Washington, Tyrrell, portions of Hyde counties in NC	Sustain engagement with steering committee of grant partners and regional stakeholders, inclusive community engagement with diverse audiences. Utilize BIL funding for continued community engagement during future Study phases and scaling up to other areas in the region. Coordination with partners conducting complimentary projects in the area to leverage resources and avoid duplication of effort.	Implementation of NOAA Digital Coast Grant to develop a strategy to ensure equitable, inclusive engagement with communities vulnerable to flooding on a regional hydrologic study.	Weekly
Tribal Communities (partners include Tribal liaisons and consultants, Sierra Club, Duke University, NC Commission of Indian Affairs, VA Coastal Policy Center, VA Council of Indians, Southeast Climate Adaptation Science Center, UNC American Indian Center, UVA Coastal Futures Conservatory, and others)	Focused engagement with Tribes within APNEP program area + collaboration with coastal plain Tribes in NC/VA/SC and throughout the southeast.	Community engagement, identification of tribal perspectives on climate risk and vulnerability, water resources, environmental issues, inter-tribal learning and collaboration, development of GIS toolkits and resources tailored to tribal needs, and best practices for resilience practitioners (agencies, universities, NGOs). Includes participation in pow-wows and community events, paddling and place-based learning and observation. APNEP staff advocate for ensuring agencies, universities, NGOs include Tribes in resilience planning processes. Collaborate where feasible with partners that work with Tribes to leverage resources.	Continued implementation of the Tribal Coastal Resilience Connections Program initiated by APNEP and tribal partners in 2019. Engagement with federal, state, and unrecognized tribal communities and groups with both present day and ancestral ties to the region that may be outside of the watershed and program area.	APNEP hired TCRC program coordinator and continues working with the overall project director who determine the appropriate engagement strategy, timing, and approach.



<p>SAV Protection and Restoration (SAV Partnership and STAC, SWCD, WRIT, local governments)</p>	<p>NC Coastal counties adjacent to sounds and tributaries that contain SAV. Upstream counties if nutrient / WQ issues or where BMP may be effective identified.</p>	<p>Utilize Spatial Targeting project to identify communities adjacent to the sounds and tributaries interested in protecting water quality and their SAV resources, and eradicating aquatic nuisance species. Development of outreach materials and strategy. Print and distribute infographics developed by intern tailored to public and local governments.</p>	<p>Continue working with the SAV team and Spatial Targeting Committee on approach. Include partners to assist in targeting areas where water quality improvements needed to protect SAV. Continued development of materials to educate the public and local government about the value of SAV and importance of protecting water quality and coastal habitats.</p>	<p>Schedule and timing determined by staff team leads and committee co-chairs</p>
<p>NC Resilience Exchange (Local governments, resilience practitioners)</p>	<p>North Carolina portion of program area (statewide tool)</p>	<p>Assist with outreach to local governments and communities to spread the word about the availability of the Statewide Resilience Clearinghouse developed for local governments (release anticipated early 2024). Ensure inclusion of APNEP funded tool developed by Wetlands Watch to incentivize the use of natural infrastructure by local governments and communities to build resilience to storm driven flooding. The project includes a resilience toolbox and outreach materials that identify the co-benefits of different coastal habitat types by highlighting their ability to generate credits for local governments in water quality (TMDL) and hazard mitigation (FEMA CRS) programs.</p>	<p>Targeted outreach to local governments. Continued participation on Statewide Clearinghouse Committee to implement EO80/NWL action plans. Help identify communities that are interested in resilience planning and may benefit from BIL funding.</p>	<p>Quarterly</p>
<p>NC Coastal Resilience Community of Practice, Hampton Roads (VA) Adaptation Forum</p>	<p>Coastal (CAMA/CZMA) counties in watershed</p>	<p>Planning, project prioritization, lessons learned. Assist with identifying communities that will benefit the most from BIL funding.</p>	<p>Work through established workgroups: the COP brings together diverse coastal stakeholders to focus on how ecosystem resilience can build local community resilience. Members include local government, agencies, universities, and NGOs. The forum includes local municipal government staff, scientific experts, private sector engineers, state and federal agency staff, NGOs, and other stakeholders to facilitate regional coordination, information</p>	<p>Quarterly</p>

			exchange and share adaptation best practices.	
Downeast Resilience Network (Core Sound Waterfowl Museum, Saltwater Connections, multiple partners)	Carteret County, NC	Community engagement, continued networking with partners to identify needs and collaborate on project ideas.	APNEP staff have long participated in community engagement efforts in this unique region known for its fishing economy and residents' Hoi Toider accent, a dialect remnant from colonial Carolina.	Ongoing
NC Water Resources Improvement Team, Watershed Stewardship Network	North Carolina portion of program area	WRIT includes representatives from several divisions within NCDEQ and several from outside including the NC Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC), NCDA&CS Division of Soil & Water Conservation (DSWC) and NC Forest Service (NCFS), and the NC Land & Water Fund (NCLWF). The group includes staff working on nonpoint source pollution issues including basin planners, TMDL/303d listing, Nine Element and Watershed Action Plans, ecological flows, watershed restoration projects, BMP implementation, and implementing recommendations in the state's river basin plans which are updated on 5-year cycles.	Work through established state interagency water resources team and statewide networks to prioritize projects, fill gaps in watershed planning, help identify non-point source solution projects and implement River Basin Plans, assist local government and communities with water resources planning and water quality improvements. Help identify communities that need assistance developing watershed action plans and may benefit from BIL funding.	Monthly
AP Federal Partnership (Led by USFWS)	Program Area: (emphasis on Albemarle Sound and three COGs watersheds where 11 National Wildlife Refuges located in southeastern VA/northeastern NC)	Meeting, Planning, project prioritization. Federal agencies are seeking to build on investments in the Albemarle Pamlico by strategically investing in efforts that increase the resiliency of the land, water, and surrounding communities in the watershed. The AP has been designated by the White House Council for Environmental Quality as one of 3 nationwide pilots for place based collaborative coastal resilience planning.	Collaborate with partners to leverage and strengthen impact of federal investments to Albemarle Pamlico region.	Quarterly
NC Natural and Working Lands Steering Committee (+ Coastal Habitat and Pocosin Wetlands workgroups)	Program Area	Implementation of NWL Action Plan, project prioritization, selection criteria. Engagement strategy will be developed for individual projects with an emphasis on Coastal Habitats and Pocosins. The Steering Committee maintains an implementation	Continued participation on NWL to implement the 2020 Action Plan. Ensure cross-cutting collaboration across different workgroups, refine needs that also meet projects listed in this table and the BIL strategy.	Quarterly

		tracker that includes identified partners and stakeholders.		
Coastal Wetlands Mapping (includes coordination with DWR, DMF, SASMI, SERPASS, Sentinel Landscapes, Currituck Sound Coalition, NWL Coastal Habitats team, etc.)	Coastal (CAMA/CZMA) counties in watershed	To address a gap in coastal habitat areal extent metrics APNEP will work with partners such as NC Wetlands Plan staff (NC-DWR), PEW, NC Division of Coastal Management, and Coastal Habitat Protection Plan (CHPP) team members to develop a needs assessment of mapping wetlands in the region. Utilize Spatial Targeting project to identify communities adjacent to coastal wetlands and share mapping information. Development of outreach materials and strategy.	Assist with outreach for implementation of multiple coastal wetlands protection and restoration plans. Also develop strategies for outreach to inform the public of the importance of wetlands, co-benefits of natural and nature-based features to build ecosystem and community resilience.	Ongoing
Release of Updated CCMP	Program Area	Raise awareness of APNEP’s work in the region, availability of funding to accelerate CCMP implementation, and strengthen community engagement	Develop a strategy to promote the release of the updated CCMP, raise awareness of the importance of protecting our watersheds and estuarine ecosystems.	Ongoing
NGOs: Environmental Defense Fund, The Conservation Fund’s Resourceful Communities, Conservation Trust, etc.	Program Area	Meeting, Planning, Engagement	Collaborate with partners to avoid duplication of effort, leverage BIL investments, Support, guidance for greater engagement	APNEP frequently engages these organizations for assistance with community engagement.
NC Councils of Government and VA Regional Planning District Commissions	APNEP Watershed	Meeting, Planning, Selection Criteria, Engagement	Collaborate with regional entities in VA and NC that work with local governments. Help identify communities that may benefit from BIL funding.	Ongoing
Soil and Water Conservation Districts	APNEP Watershed and individual counties (SWCD typically housed in local government)	Meeting, Planning, Selection Criteria, Engagement	Collaborate with Soil and Water Districts in VA and NC. Help identify farming and rural communities that may benefit from BIL funding.	Ongoing

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## **Appendix A. APNEP's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Statement (2020)**

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The Mission of the Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Partnership (APNEP) is to identify, protect, and restore the significant natural resources of the Albemarle-Pamlico estuarine system. As such, the Partnership is committed to addressing environmental inequities by continually reevaluating our partnerships, protection and restoration efforts, and engagement processes through the lens of increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout the Albemarle-Pamlico estuarine system.

Our partnerships with governmental, academic, community, and nonprofit organizations are the foundation of how we work; through our funding processes, representation within citizen advisory groups, strategic planning efforts, and long-term ecosystem priorities, we can foster a Partnership that is inclusive of the diverse perspectives within the region and which works to identify, protect, and restore the region's significant natural resources in ways that increase equity among its communities. By facilitating communication and collaboration among different organizations throughout the region, APNEP seeks to leverage its resources and those of its partners to accomplish more together than any individual organization could alone. This can only be accomplished with a diverse array of perspectives and voices.

Increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion through our work is integral to our ecosystem-based management perspective, which views human communities as a vital component of the overall ecosystem. We are committed to approaching this work in a way that is inclusive of diverse connections to the environment, inclusive of perspectives that may otherwise be unheard, and increases equity through ecosystem protection and restoration efforts. We are also dedicated to broad inclusion in our educational and engagement efforts.

Specifically, we commit to:

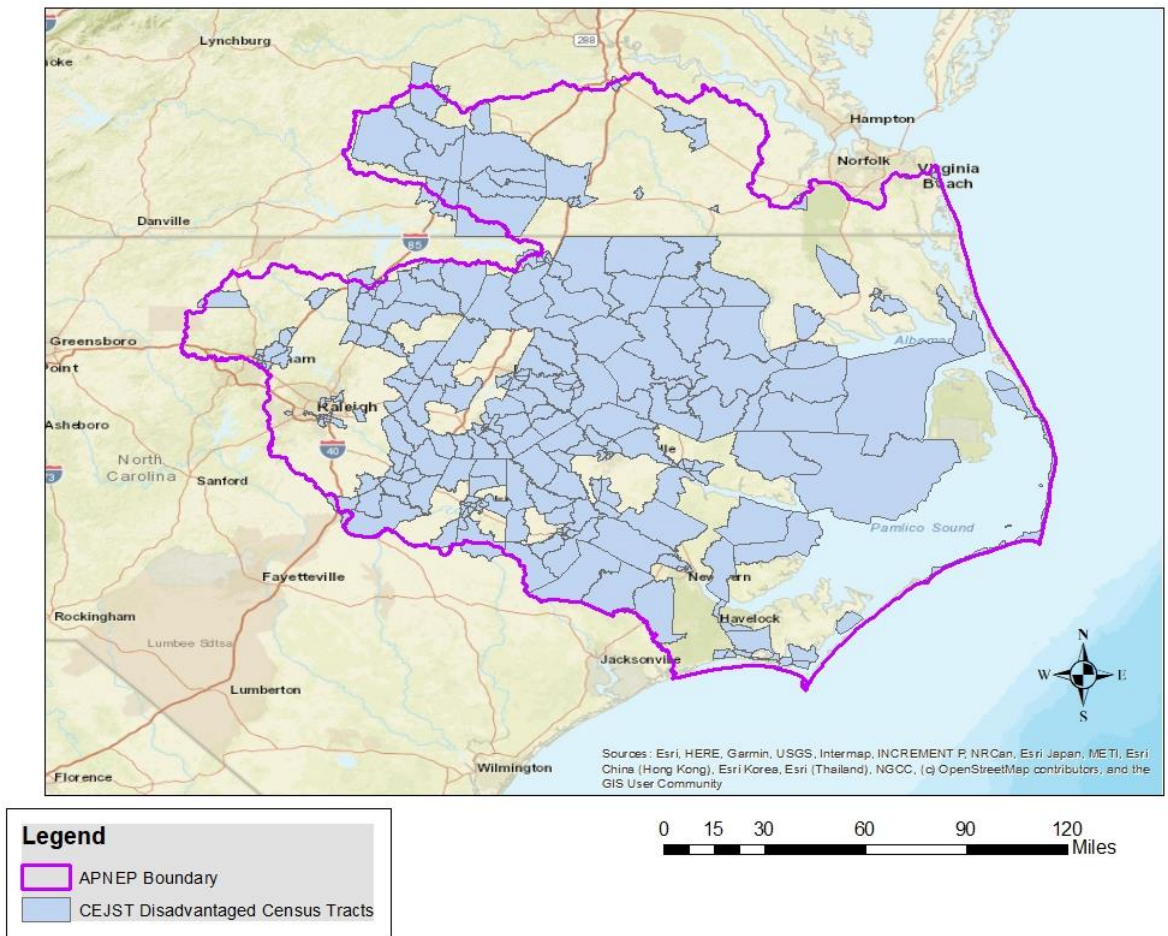
1. Engage communities and stakeholders that are representative of the broader populations within our programmatic boundaries to implement the 2012-2022 Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP) and the Partnership's Mission.
2. Incorporate diversity, equity, and broad community inclusion as an ecosystem outcome(s) with associated objectives and actions into the 2022-2032 revision of the CCMP.
3. Work to engage diverse communities and populations in the organization's decisions and diversify the perspectives represented within all of Partnership's management and citizen advisory groups.
4. Conduct an internal organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion self-assessment and provide externally facilitated training for management and citizen advisory groups and staff as warranted.
5. Report annually on actions taken to enact these commitments in our Annual Work Plan.

*Affirmed September 1, 2020, APNEP Leadership Council*

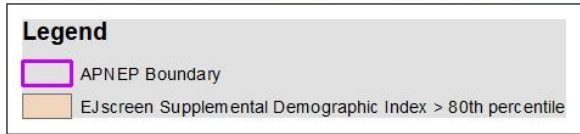
## Appendix B: Initial Analysis of Geographic Tools to Define Disadvantaged Communities to Address Justice40

NCDEQ’s Title IV and Environmental Justice Coordinator assisted with developing the following comparisons for APNEP to consider when establishing a definition for disadvantaged communities and establishing guidelines for targeting projects and tracking funds. At the time of analysis, at this time a GIS data layers for Title One schools and the two geographic designations were not available to APNEP, but their locations will be used to inform implementation of projects.

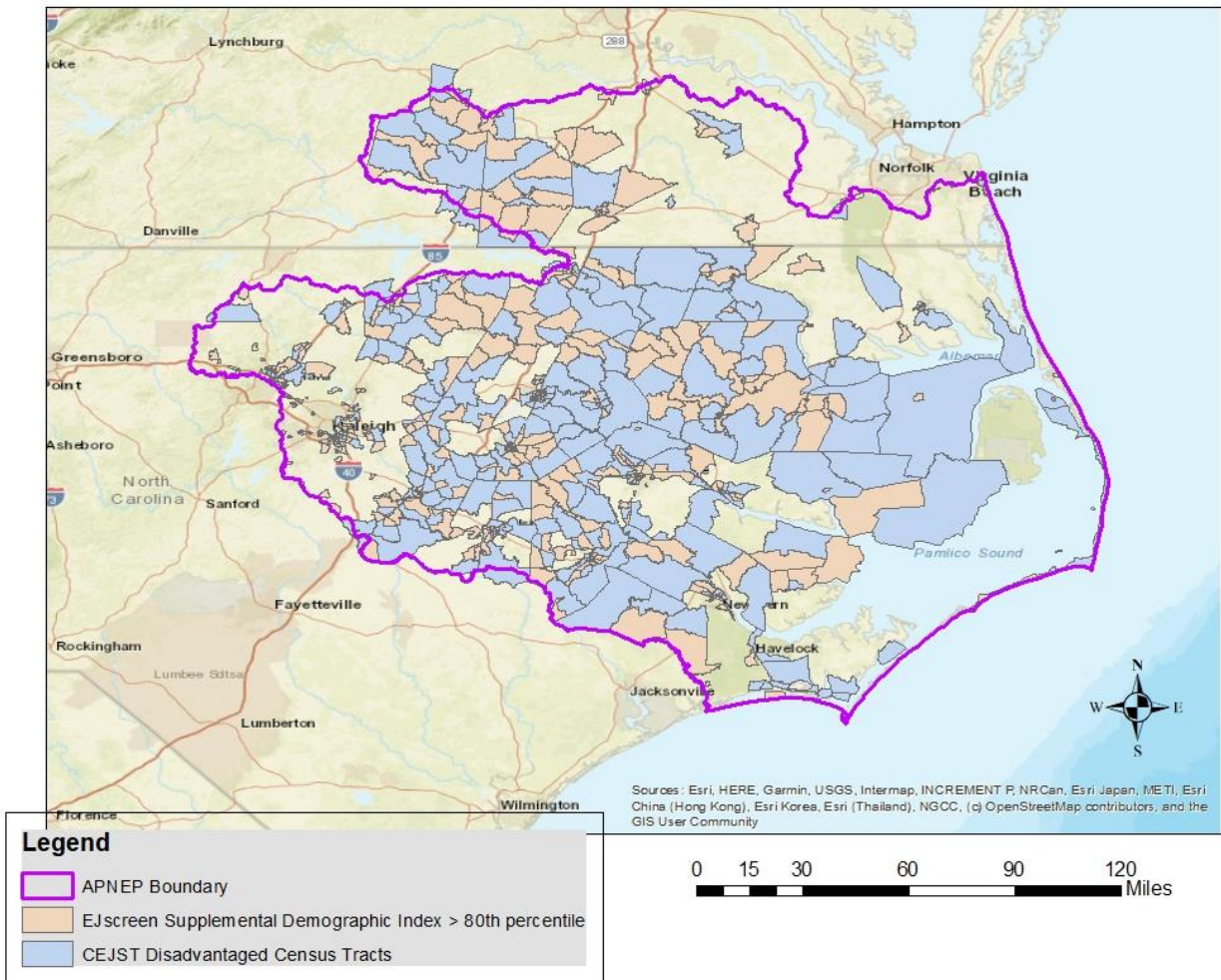
This information will be incorporated into the GIS tool being developed with guidance from the STAC to prioritize CCMP projects and track where funds are spent.



The APNEP boundary intersects with 642 total Census tracts. Of those, 247 are defined as disadvantaged under CEJST. That is 38.5% of the census tracts considered disadvantaged.



APNEP will also track by using the EJSCREEN Supplemental demographic indicator for areas above the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile compared to the state. The EJSCREEN data is on the block group level using 2020 census data. A total of 2172 block groups centroids fall within the APNEP boundary. Of those, 462 block groups are considered disadvantaged (in the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile or higher on the state comparison). That means only 20% of the block groups covered by the APNEP region are considered disadvantaged under this definition.



75% of the EJScreen block groups overlap with the CEJST disadvantaged areas (census tract level using 2010 data) with 358 out of a total of 462 disadvantaged block groups. Thus, 104 additional block groups are considered disadvantaged when using both definitions, increasing the areas for benefits to be considered going towards disadvantaged communities.