



United States Department of the Interior

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TO: Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit (CESU) Council
Mr. Bret Meldrum, Acting National CESU Coordinator

FROM: Dr. Brian Mitchell, North Atlantic Coast CESU Research Coordinator, National Park Service

SUBJECT: Review and Recommendation for Renewal of the Chesapeake Watershed (CHWA) CESU

Thank you for the opportunity to review the Chesapeake Watershed (CHWA) Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit (CESU). The CESU is applying for its 5-year renewal, and this memorandum is one of the external reviews required during the renewal process. I have structured my feedback according to the three sections of the renewal criteria – federal responsibilities, host university responsibilities, and participation of all partners – followed by my summary and recommendations.

Federal Responsibilities

The federal agencies provided significant funding and support for cooperative scientific and scholarly activities in a variety of disciplines from FY 2021 to FY 2025. At least eight of the 14 CHWA CESU federal partners provided funding to CESU non-federal partners for a total of 521 projects and more than \$90M. Based on the partial data available at <https://cwcesu.org/renewal-information/>, and excluding 78 National Park Service unfunded master cooperative agreements, the National Park Service was the most active federal partner by number of projects (275 of 382, or 72%) and funding (\$53.5M, or 57%). The United States Geological Survey was the second most active, with 35 projects (9%) and \$4.5M (5%), though the Natural Resource Conservation Service provided more funds (\$15.7M and 17%), along with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (\$11.9M and 13%) and the United States Army Corps of Engineers (4.7M and 5%). The remaining agencies combined provided 7% of the projects and less than 5% of the total funds.

The funding that the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science (UMCES) received for their CESU Host responsibilities was not provided in a consistent and timely manner. The National Park Service National Capitol Region provided additional support that allowed the CESU to meet the requirements of its cooperative and joint venture agreement. The additional support also enabled the CESU to create and maintain a new web site, improve network databases, and offer student awards and fellowships. Beyond the funding, the National Park Service also provided significant in-kind support via the CESU Research Coordinator who served as the CHWA CESU Co-Director.

The Federal Managers Committee met annually in 2021-2024, and achieved an impressive attendance rate averaging above 90%. Substantial staff turnover and the extended federal shutdown prevented the CESU from holding a Federal Managers Committee meeting in 2025. Some federal partners reported serving on graduate student committees at partner institutions.

Since its last renewal, the number of projects initiated through the CHWA CESU increased from about 260 to well over 400. The CESU is not aware of any major administrative issues or concerns, despite the much higher volume. When available, final products are added to the CESU's projects database.

Host Responsibilities

UMCES has served as host of the CHWA CESU since its inception in 2001. From FY 2021 to FY 2025, more than a dozen host university faculty were awarded 24 projects totaling \$12.4M (including a \$9.1M single award from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), making it one of the CESU's most active partners and demonstrating ongoing engagement in the CESU effort.

The funding received by the CHWA CESU (including supplemental funds from the National Park Service regional office) was used to support the part-time administrative coordinator, the part-time co-director, part-time information technology support, as well as basic supplies and utilities (such as a Zoom account and Constant Contact subscription). The university provided in-kind support, including providing the National Park Service Research Coordinator with office space and access to university facilities. Federal partners have presented seminars in the UMCES Appalachian Laboratory's ongoing Visiting Scholar Seminar Series, and are invited to attend this series and other events at the laboratory.

The CHWA CESU team's ongoing engagement, responsiveness, and support have provided continuity in operations and ensured that UMCES continues to meet its core responsibilities as host of the CESU. This has included maintaining regular communications with partners through emails, and annual federal manager and partner meetings. The CESU also works to maintain and share information through its website, which includes administrative documents, guidance for project planning, and an experts database that is linked to a projects database. The CHWA CESU has used social media in the past and found it to not be effective for communicating with partners. They will be exploring other communication options in the coming years.

Participation of all Partners

Student education is a fundamental component of many CHWA CESU projects, which actively facilitate student involvement in conservation research and technical assistance. Undergraduate and graduate students have been engaged in various CESU-funded initiatives, contributing to data collection, analysis, and report development. The CESU partners reported engaging 217 undergraduates and 258 graduate students from fiscal year 2021 through 2025. Students were directly involved in many aspects of CESU research projects, including mentoring of undergraduate students by graduate students. This heavy reliance on students occasionally led to challenges, including difficulties navigating student schedules and occasional low-quality work that required extensive revision. On the whole, though, student involvement supports partner

academic missions and develops a new generation of skilled professionals while meeting the needs of federal agencies for high quality research and technical assistance.

Three federal partners (NPS, NRCS, and NOAA) were responsible for more than 85% of the funding from FY 2021 through 2025, and four federal partners (NPS, USGS, NRCS, and NOAA) were responsible for over 90% of the projects. Meanwhile, approximately 75% of the CHWA CESU non-federal partners received at least one funded project over the five-year period. Most partners praised the host university's communication efforts, and the partners who felt less engaged generally cited causes beyond the CESU's control, such as high turnover in federal partner staff and limited internal bandwidth.

More than a third of the CHWA CESU partners noted benefits to participating in the CESU beyond receiving funded projects. These include networking with potential collaborators and professional development through connections with federal partners.

Summary and Recommendations

Since its establishment in 2001, the CHWA CESU has served an important role in enabling CESU partners to work together in support of informed public trust resource stewardship. The total number of partners and the total funding from federal agencies have grown substantially over the past 5 years and are indicative of the CESU's success. The host university has continued to provide administrative support to the CHWA CESU and in-kind support that helps make the CESU successful.

The Chesapeake Watershed CESU has the largest number of partners of any of the CESUs, and is among the top CESUs in the amount of funding awarded to partners. This is a testament to the sustained efforts made by the CESU to recruit and engage partners. There is clearly no need to change course or redirect such a successful program. However, I do have a few suggestions for the CHWA CESU to consider as they develop their strategic plan for the next five years:

- The strategic plan does not need to be long. You could identify key requirements and a few areas of achievable improvement (e.g., exploring additional communication options), and identify a few actions for each. This could be done in a few pages, rather than in a lengthy report.
- The Chesapeake Watershed CESU has long been a leader in developing useful tools for supporting the CESU's work, including their experts and projects databases. Now is a good time to think through how the CESU will interact with a national level experts database (and potential projects database) that were inspired by their work and that are being developed as part of the new national CESU website.
- The renewal survey yielded a number of suggestions for increasing engagement with partners that should be carefully considered for value, feasibility and long-term sustainability.

There are some areas where action by the CESU Council would support the CHWA CESU as well as the other CESU networks:

- A centralized process and system for federal partners to report on CESU awards is a perennial need. I am aware that most agencies don't have a consistent way to identify CESU agreements, and that there is no consistent set of information that is provided

when agreements are reported. Identifying the minimum information needed and working with the federal partners to provide that to the CESUs would yield a substantial efficiency improvement.

- CESU partners have repeatedly requested that federal partners document and share their processes for CESU agreements. Some federal partners simply post opportunities to grants.gov and note that proposals can request to use the CESU, while others provide targeted CESU agreements (also posted on grants.gov), and still others distribute funding opportunities through the host universities. CESU partners are understandably confused about when and how they can take advantage of their CESU membership.
- Almost half of the CHWA CESU federal partners did not fund projects (or did not report any funded projects). While some of this is due to problems with record-keeping at a time of unprecedented staff turnover, part is also lack of knowledge by project leads within federal partner agencies about when and how to use the CESU network. Providing information and outreach within federal partners would help increase awareness and utilization of the CESU network.
- Finally, late and uncertain funding was noted by the Chesapeake Watershed CESU and is a perennial problem for the CESU system. The CESU Council discussed consequences for providing late funding, specifically suspended membership until their annual fees are paid. This was to be implemented with a notice distributed through the CESU network, instructing non-federal partners to charge normal overhead on new agreements until the non-federal partner meets its obligations. Implementing this approach or devising an alternative consequence for late payment might help encourage federal partners to establish their agreements in a timely fashion.

Based on my review, I strongly support renewal of the CHWA CESU cooperative and joint venture agreement for another five-year term (FY 2026 to FY 2030) and for the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science to continue to serve as the host university.