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Aloha Bret,

Please find below our external review of the Chesapeake Watershed CESU Self-Assessment for their renewal. It is always interesting to learn more in depth about other regions, their efforts, and their partnerships. I engaged Dakota Kaupu, the graduate assistant that I have hired to work with me through HPI-CESU. It was a learning experience for her and she's excited to take what she learned here into her work with me.

Please let me know if you have any questions on any of our comments.

Sharon Ziegler-Chong

Associate Director, LOCF

Director, HPI-CESU

Cc.

D. Filer

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## **Chesapeake Watershed Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit Renewal External Review - 2026**

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Futures/Hawai'i-Pacific Islands CESU Director

Dakota Kaupu, University of Hawai'i at Hilo, TCBES Graduate Student

This assessment of the Chesapeake Watershed Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit (CW-CESU) is based on a review of the 2026 renewal documentation and supplemental materials by Dakota Kaupu and Sharon Ziegler-Chong, Director of the Hawai'i-Pacific Islands CESU. These materials were reviewed alongside the unit's online databases and website. The CW-CESU also made a separate page available within their website containing the pertinent renewal information needed for the review, and we encourage the Council to review the full self-assessment. The following report synthesizes these findings across the three primary evaluation categories to provide the Council with a clear overview of the unit's operational health and collaborative impact. We recommend that UMCES-AL remain in its role during the next five-year period.

### **Category A: Federal Responsibilities Highlights**

- The data on federal engagement shared by CW-CESU paints a rich picture of engagement of both federal and nonfederal members. The report and the accompanying materials well-represented the effort. While not all federal agencies engaged in projects during the stated period, which is consistent with all CESUs and does not reflect on the efforts of the host university; this report demonstrates clearly how federal agencies utilize the CESU funding mechanism to support a wide swath of project types .
- In terms of federal outreach, it appears that the CW-CESU, i.e., NPS RC Dan Filer, did an excellent job at facilitating federal collaboration and engagement with CW-CESU nonfederal partners. Throughout the report, the CW-CESU recognizes the contributions of Dan Filer and the excellent work he is doing as the NPS CW CESU Research Coordinator. This is a strong example of the importance of having a dedicated federal Research Coordinator within a CESU region.
- It would appear that this CESU's proximity to Washington, DC helps in garnering a very high level of support and engagement of federal partners..
- While there was substantial information available in the report and the online resources, we were interested in an estimate of the total funding amount represented by the listed 521 projects in the last 5 years, which is a further part of the impact story of this collaboration.

### **Category B: Host University Responsibilities Highlights**

- The CW-CESU appears to effectively communicate research opportunities and advocates for the program through diverse channels, including seminars, colloquiums, and convocations. The breadth of these dissemination methods is impressive, facilitating robust and diverse community engagement and training opportunities. We look forward

to hearing how this CESU and others explore other communication channels to see what works best for them and their partners.

- Notable is the host university salary contributions to the CESU staffing. Equally impressive is the tools developed and used. The project database and the Projects and the Experts Database are to be held as glowing examples across the CESU network of a well-organized and serviced CESU office.
- Of note is that Danny Filer, the NPS Research Coordinator, appears to take on a good deal of the CW-CESU efforts for the host university. He connects with both federal and nonfederal partners, hosts informational sessions, and connects them to each other. Again, this is a great example of the benefit of a dedicated federal Research Coordinator to federal-nonfederal collaborations. As NPS shifts to a model in other CESUs in which Research Coordinators are responsible for multiple CESUs, the federal members should be aware that those roles will fall completely on the often underfunded host university.

#### Category C: Participation of all Partners Highlights

- Being able to track all projects and getting a count of undergraduate and graduate students is an arduous task. The CW-CESU collected good information via a survey that demonstrated how the different members of the CW-CESU value and focus on supporting students' academic journey as part of CESU efforts.
- Given the strong resources for collecting project information that are available to this CESU, it would be interesting to see them collect the engagement of students by project versus by organization.
- Truly impressive for this CESU is the high level of participation across 75% of its nonfederal partners in projects and in engaging with the CESU overall. Again, this seems to be related to the high level engagement of Research Coordinator Danny Filer.
- It would be interesting to include a discussion about the breadth of CW-CESU projects. Chesapeake Bay. While it is possible to review the project database, see the broad scope of the projects, sort the information, as well as see the project spotlights, we would like to have had a summary of the impact of the CW-CESU on the stewardship of this complex watershed. Again, that is part of the CW-CESU story that would be valuable to understand.
- All CESUs felt the challenges faced this period due to pressures outside of our control, but the CW-CESUs suggestions to increase or maintain future engagement gives us a good idea how they will continue to function after renewal.

**Recommendation:** We strongly recommend that the Chesapeake Watershed CESU be renewed for another five years and look forward to observing their growth in this next period.

