

MassBays National Estuary Partnership

2026 Strategic Communications and Engagement Plan



March 2026



The 2026 Communications Plan is a companion document to the 2023 Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan prepared by the MassBays National Estuary Partnership.

This document was prepared on behalf of the MassBays National Estuary Partnership by the Urban Harbors Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston with input from the MassBays National Estuary Partnership's Communications Subcommittee.

Table of Contents

I. Introduction..... 4

II. Accomplishments Achieved Since 2018 Strategic Plan 5

III. Existing Challenges..... 8

IV. Goals and Objectives 9

V. Action Items 11

VI. Conclusion 12

I. Introduction

The Massachusetts Bays National Estuary Partnership (MassBays) is one of 28 National Estuary Programs (NEPs) established under Section 320 of the Clean Water Act to protect and restore the water quality and ecological integrity of these estuaries. This role spans conservation and restoration of habitats, improvement of water quality, a balanced indigenous wildlife population, and sustainable recreational and socioeconomic activities to support the wellbeing of communities that rely on the estuaries. To accomplish this, the program focuses on addressing urgent, emerging, and challenging issues that threaten the ecological and economic wellbeing of the estuaries.

MassBays’ planning area extends from Salisbury to Provincetown, MA, including over 1.7 million year-round residents in 50 coastal communities. The planning area covers over 1100 miles of coast, including 45 estuarine embayments along Ipswich Bay, Massachusetts Bay, and Cape Cod Bay. The inland watershed covers more than 7,000 square miles and includes several estuaries, the largest being the Merrimack River.

The work of MassBays within its planning area is guided by the 2023 Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP). The CCMP is a 10-year blueprint of strategies to address current and emerging issues impacting the Bays, and to guide MassBays’ steps to conserve and restore the natural resources of the estuaries and watersheds within the MassBays planning area. The 2023 CCMP is uniquely grounded in science-based habitat targets that guide its organizational and programmatic goals, as well as its environmental outcomes (Figure 1).

Organizational Goals	+ Programmatic Goals	→ Environmental Outcomes
MassBays is a primary source for information about conditions and trends in Ipswich Bay, Massachusetts Bay, and Cape Cod Bay.	MassBays provides new resources to support research and management in the Bays.	Locally significant habitats and ecosystems assessed and prioritized for research, assessment, and implementation actions.
MassBays is an important influence on local decision making that recognizes the roles, functions, and values of healthy habitats in the Bays.	MassBays reaches all study-area municipalities with actionable information about coastal habitats.	Ambient water quality supports biodiversity; observed improvements in habitat continuity and hydrological connectivity at the local level.
MassBays is a model program for management and planning that addresses diversity among estuaries.	MassBays provides regular and locally informed State of the Bays reporting that reflects the unique characteristics of MassBays assessment areas, and documents progress toward target conditions.	Locally relevant improvements in water quality, habitat, biodiversity, and resilience.

Figure 1: Goals and Outcomes for MassBays (Source: MassBays CCMP, 2023).

A priority of the 2023 CCMP is the development of a strategic Communications Plan to broaden awareness of the unique role of MassBays in the universe of other actors in the coastal management community. Implementation of the CCMP requires informed, engaged, and empowered partners that contribute collectively to shared goals. MassBays will build on its experience as a neutral convener by developing the 2026 Communications Plan to prioritize and focus engagement and communication in support of its mission to protect, restore, and enhance the estuarine resources of its study area. In particular, the 2026 Communications Plan will guide MassBays in its efforts to implement the goals of the CCMP, communicate environmental conditions and trends in the Bays to different audiences (e.g., decision makers, municipalities, the public, legislators), and streamline its outreach and engagement process with constituents and partners to improve the health of our estuaries.

II. Accomplishments Achieved Since 2018 Strategic Plan

The 2018 MassBays Strategic Communications Plan, which was developed by the Communications Subcommittee in collaboration with a consultant, outlined the following overarching goals:

- Broaden the awareness of MassBays and its programs;
- Highlight scientific research, monitoring, and management needs across the Bays; and
- Invite current and new partners to participate actively in implementing the CCMP.

In response, MassBays achieved the following:

1. Broaden awareness of MassBays and its programs

- Website: MassBays developed a website ([MassBays.org](https://massbays.org)) and dedicated email address: massbaysnep@umb.edu
- Social media: MassBays established a social media presence on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Through these platforms, MassBays shares updates on initiatives and events, highlights funded projects, announces solicitations for the MassBays Healthy Estuaries Grant, features the work of MassBays and its many partners, and celebrates National Estuaries Week each September.
- YouTube channel: MassBays has a dedicated [YouTube channel](#) where users can access training workshops and other resources.
- Press releases: A press release was published in May of 2024 to announce that MassBays awarded funding under its Healthy Estuaries Grant program.
- Newsletter: MassBays has published a quarterly newsletter since 2013. In 2024, the e-newsletter format was revised to circulate content that will reach different

audiences and generate interest in the program from more groups. The [e-newsletter](#) is shared with over 1,000 people (and counting) through Constant Contact . The website, social media, meetings, and other communication streams will continue to include an e-newsletter sign-up opportunity.

- **Event:** MassBays hosted a [Gulf of Maine Monitoring and Research Symposium](#) in April 2025 to bring managers, decision-makers, scientists, and other stakeholders together to discuss the condition of the Gulf and to emphasize the need for cooperation to safeguard its future. This event served to highlight the mission of MassBays and the other NEPs (Casco Bay Estuary Partnership, Piscataqua River Estuary Partnership) in the Gulf of Maine, as well as the work conducted by a myriad of entities (e.g., Gulf of Maine Research Institute, Northeast Regional Association of Coastal and Ocean Observing Systems, and many others).
- **Communications position:** The Management Committee recognized the need for dedicated staff to manage communications and supports hiring a communications professional. MassBays drafted a job description with the aim of having that person on board before June 2026.

2. Highlight scientific findings from MassBays research, monitoring, and management, and identify new and relevant needs across the planning area

- **Training workshops for volunteers:** MassBays staff and five Regional Coordinators led several monitoring and training programs to spur action to improve estuarine conditions and foster stewardship. These programs provided workshops and on-site training to volunteers and participants to 1) survey eelgrass in embayments, 2) identify invasive species, and 3) collect water samples in accordance with EPA-approved quality assurance protocols.
- **Healthy Estuaries Grant program projects:** Through its biannual [Healthy Estuaries Grant program](#) established in 2011, MassBays has provided almost \$1 million in funding to 45 projects. Examples of the 2024 projects include 1) an assessment of shellfish resources in the town of Hingham, 2) a study to identify the source of “legacy” nutrients in sediments in Salem Sound, and 3) use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) technology for monitoring marsh edge erosion, tracking large-scale marsh wrack deposition, and advancing native eelgrass restoration in Great Marsh. All projects are aligned with the mission of MassBays and the goals of the CCMP, and address knowledge as well as restoration gaps. The next call for proposals will open in 2026.
- **Tools to address community monitoring needs:** In response to the needs of watershed groups, communities, and other estuarine users, MassBays developed several tools to help partners collect, analyze, and share robust data. These data help to assess estuarine conditions both at the local scale and across the broader MassBays region. The tools are disseminated through workshops and webinars

which train managers on data analyses (MassWaterR), train volunteer organizations on developing Quality Assurance Project Plans (QAPP) using the AquaQAPP tool, and facilitate the uploading of data into EPA's Water Quality Portal (WQX). The latest interactive tool, the Ecohealth Tracking Tool (ETT), enables users to explore specific areas of interest to monitor progress toward habitat goals and observe trends in water quality conditions. More information on these tools is available [here](#).

- Community of practice conversations: MassBays hosts two regional Community of Practice online forums which include a platform for 1) users of the MassWaterR data analysis and reporting tool, and 2) the Massachusetts Seagrass Working Group. These forums provide a space for practitioners to have discussions, ask questions, and share current research across the region. The forums are moderated and updated regularly by MassBays staff.

3. *Sustain Existing Partners, Engage New Partners, and Collaborate for Shared Resources*

- New host organization: In response to the findings of the EPA program evaluation, MassBays launched a robust discussion with the Management Committee on whether and how to pursue a transition to a different host organization that aligns with the growing and evolving needs of MassBays as an NEP. An ad hoc committee composed of members of the Management Committee, MassBays Director, and EPA representative, researched similar organizational setups and developed a suite of criteria before soliciting interested organizations. In June 2022, the Management Committee approved the transition of MassBays from the Massachusetts Office of Coastal Zone Management (CZM) within the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA) to its new host organization, the University of Massachusetts Boston (UMass Boston). This transition enabled MassBays to have more autonomy for managing the program and achieving CCMP goals. It provides MassBays with greater flexibility to build partnerships, deploy its own communication platforms and messaging, and be better situated to take advantage of opportunities for diversified funding.
- Current and new partner engagement: The 2023 CCMP focuses on clear attainable goals that will enhance conditions in the bays. These can be achieved with the help of partnerships, which MassBays continues to cultivate to build a strong coalition with big ideas and a readiness to act. Over the past several years, MassBays has grown its Management Committee membership to include committed key partners and stakeholders that have been instrumental in developing the 2023 CCMP and in supporting MassBays' work in its communities. The Nominating and Governance Subcommittee is responsible for soliciting new members. In December 2024, the Management Committee revised its Standard Operating Procedures to strengthen group roles in support of MassBays' mission. Management Committee members are encouraged to participate in its various subcommittees (e.g., Science and

Technical Advisory, Communications Subcommittee, Nominating and Governance Subcommittee) as well as *ad hoc* committees as needed.

- Rebrand - Update Name and Mission: The 2018 Strategic Communications Plan recommended that MassBays change its name from “Program” to “Partnership” to better reflect the nature of its collaborative work. Additionally, the 2018 Strategic Communications Plan recommended that the Mission be revised to more clearly articulate the work of MassBays, its geographic scope, and its partnerships. MassBays partners with 50 municipal communities, as well as non-government organizations (NGOs), government agencies, academia, and the private sector. The current mission is “*to empower 50 coastal communities to protect, restore, and enhance their coastal habitats*”. These changes were adopted in 2023 in consultation with the Management Committee.

III. Existing Challenges

Despite the many accomplishments outlined above, several communication challenges still need to be addressed, including:

- Funding and capacity building: MassBays’ current communication resources are limited by the program’s capacity. Current MassBays staff take on roles in communications — including the development of website and newsletter content — in addition to other roles and responsibilities. At the same time, the five Regional Service Providers (RSPs) which host the Regional Coordinators have varying levels of communication support. Since FFY24, MassBays has contributed funding to access the Communications Specialist (0.2 FT) at the Association to Preserve Cape Cod (the RSP for the Cape Cod Region). This step has allowed MassBays to update and publish its quarterly newsletter, establish social media accounts, and continue to build a more robust website. This contract ends on September 30, 2026.

While these steps mark significant improvement, dedicated communications support is needed to achieve all CCMP goals. Robust outreach and engagement with a variety of target audiences is a priority. MassBays needs long-term, dedicated funding to support the staff and programs needed to accomplish the goals of the CCMP and the requirements of the Clean Water Act (CWA). An experienced communications professional can help lead MassBays’ agenda to grow its communication capacity and reach critical audiences (more information is provided in Section V).

- Diverse audiences with differing needs and communications preferences: MassBays’ work engages many different types of audiences including municipal staff, funders, scientists, policy makers, environmental groups, coastal/waterfront/blue technology industry, and the public. Reaching multiple audiences with specific needs makes both communication and engagement challenging.

- Keeping informed of partners’ activities to prevent overlap and maintain alignment: The work of partners, collaborators, and other stakeholders contributes to the goals of the CCMP. Regular communication is needed among MassBays and its partners to remain current on their respective work and avoid conflicting messaging. Better communication will allow MassBays to provide new resources where needed and to increase coordination, which in turn will expand reach and impact.
- Differentiating between RSP and MassBays work: In addition to the tasks outlined in the annual MassBays workplans, many of the RSPs’ organizational activities are closely aligned with the CCMP and with MassBays’ work within their communities. These synergies can increase the impact of both the MassBays program and the RSPs’ mission. While the overlap is beneficial, it can often be challenging to differentiate between their respective roles in communicating about each organization’s work. Standardizing procedures and streamlined communication are needed when sharing content through mutual channels, for example including partner logos, attributing credit for content or funding, etc.
- Regularly sharing and updating MassBays’ accomplishments: The creation of the Ecohealth Tracking Tool represents a significant accomplishment. However, these tools must be regularly updated. MassBays requires adequate resources to ensure ongoing data access, conduct timely analyses, produce annual reports, and develop new platforms that enhance timely communication about ecological progress, project success, and program improvements and accomplishments. A key metric for this is demonstrating progress in achieving the habitat targets established in the 2023 CCMP.

IV. Goals and Objectives

The goals and objectives of this 2026 communication plan will advance the implementation of the 2023 CCMP by effectively communicating MassBays’ accomplishments and implementing recommendations to address new challenges. The goals and objectives of the 2026 Communications Plan include:

Goal 1: Expand the reach and visibility of MassBays programs to enhance knowledge, data, and perception regarding the conditions and trends in the Bays and to maintain consistent and sustainable funding.

Objective 1: Ensure that MassBays’ data and information are made available to a variety of audiences (e.g., legislators, local decision makers, municipal agencies, the public, potential funders) to allow for more effective management of environmental resources, address emerging issues, and adapt to emerging coastal and water-dependent uses. Communicate research and monitoring findings to different audiences using tailored and clear messaging. Collaborate with the RSPs to ensure that research findings and monitoring inform actionable decision-making in the communities in the Bays.

Objective 2: Raise awareness among legislators and decision-makers about the ecosystem conditions and trends of the Bays, emphasizing the importance of consistent and reliable funding to support coastal resilience, water quality, and habitat restoration in the face of emerging water-dependent uses and development.

Goal 2: Expand opportunities for individuals to engage as environmental stewards.

Objective 1: Offer opportunities for stakeholders and the public to engage in environmental stewardship activities, provide input, and/or serve as outreach partners and ambassadors. Since the RSPs already carry out locally relevant public engagement projects, MassBays will enhance its focus on high-profile opportunities that reflect system-wide issues, needs, and accomplishments.

Goal 3: Broaden partnerships and increase coordination among all partners to expand the reach and impact of the MassBays work.

Objective 1: Develop ways to encourage new and existing partners to participate actively in implementing the 2023 CCMP. Specifically, engage communities and partners in identifying local environmental priorities, addressing environmental questions, and implementing potential solutions by MassBays and/or partners.

Objective 2: Demonstrate to current and potential partners that collaboration with MassBays provides resources and successful models of environmental management and habitat restoration. In addition to their primary interests, many of MassBays' partners and target audiences (Figure 2) share similar and/or overlapping concerns, and many of them are already engaged. Bringing them together in a shared enterprise will be key to success, especially in seeking sustained, reliable funding.

MassBays Partners and Target Audiences

Management Committee member organizations
Regional service providers organizations
The host institution (UMass Boston)
Environmental Protection Agency (NEP Program Coordinator)
MassBays communities including local governments and leaders
Federal and state lawmakers
Federal and state agencies
Academic and research institutions
Congressional and state legislators and other policymakers
Environmental advocacy groups and non-government organizations
Funders, grantors, and private foundations
General public
Media organizations
Relevant business communities and industry representatives, especially developers of innovative technology, tools, and processes.
Start-up or technology organizations developing innovative technology and monitoring systems

Figure 2: Examples of MassBays Partners and Target Audiences.

V. Action Items

The following action items will guide MassBays in 1) addressing the above challenges, and 2) meeting the goals and objectives of the CCMP.

Action 1: Create a communications and development position to implement a detailed and comprehensive framework for communications activities that focuses on: 1) developing and sharing timely content about the conditions, accomplishments, and opportunities in the MassBays planning area, and 2) elevating the Partnership's profile to cultivate important audiences including new partners, the media, potential funders, and communities. Activities would include:

- Convening a Communications Subcommittee made up of partners to advise and support the Communications and Development professional by exploring avenues to promote the MassBays' unique role to support funding requests and public engagement
- Identifying short- and long-term resources needed to implement outreach and engagement for MassBays-wide issues.
- Engaging with critical target audiences and partners to identify and advance common objectives, to collaborate with those partners to identify opportunities for augmenting and supporting each other's outreach, and to mobilize mutual support.
- Coordinating closely with UMass Boston's University Advancement and with the Marketing and Engagement Division teams as appropriate to develop messaging and outreach in order to cultivate strong relationships and trust with potential funders and program supporters.
- Creating a communications framework that includes a calendar for distributing information to appropriate media and audiences (e.g., RSPs, scientists and practitioners, community activists, environmental advocates, journalists, managers/policymakers, funders, and the public).
- Overseeing the content of the MassBays website, social media, press releases, RFPs, newsletter, press releases, and other digital or physical publications, and assisting with MassBays and partner event coordination.

Action 2: Develop communications material about MassBays' core functions to ensure standardized and consistent messaging, including:

- A simple but powerful description of MassBays' goals and accomplishments for external audiences.
- Key messages about successes, challenges, and future endeavors.
- Key messages about the value and impact of MassBays and its partners.

- Language that can be shared to engage new audiences in MassBays’ work (e.g., “Ten ways to get involved in your local watershed”).
- Clear processes for messaging when partners work collaboratively and can cross-amplify the message across various platforms.

Action 3: Coordinate with partners to develop and share accessible content appropriate for priority audiences

- Sharing important events, research/project results, MassBays and partner accomplishments, case studies, resources, and other materials.
- Synthesizing and highlighting findings across MassBays’ regions to share compelling stories, including results of MassBays- and RSP-supported work and technical assistance to communities such as monitoring and restoration tools in ways appropriate to the information.
- Hosting networking, fact-finding, educational, informational, and public input events, including the State of the Bays conference (every 5 yrs), and invited speaking engagements, conferences, and local/community.
- Hosting events to promote engagement with priority science, preservation, and restoration issues and opportunities.
- Develop reports and publications as needed including: 1) the MassBays Annual Report, fact sheets, and brochure which share MassBays and RSP work and accomplishments with potential partners and funders, and 2) periodic newsletters and posts via website, blogs, and social media; webinars and panel discussions, to highlight the work and findings of MassBays Science and Technology Advisory Committee and other advisory groups and relevant research in collaboration with UMass Boston departments.

Action 4: Incorporate outreach and engagement as key elements of a strategy to secure sustainable CCMP and program funding

- Include the 2023 Communications Plan as a key element of the MassBays Finance Strategy, especially its role in making the case for supporting the MassBays program and activities by highlighting the benefits to funders and communities through its collaborative work strategy. Eligible sources of funding include federal and state grants as well as corporate and foundation funding, and philanthropic gifts.

VI. Conclusion

MassBays’ work to promote healthy and resilient estuaries and sustainable ecosystems is critical to the future of Massachusetts’ waterways. This Communications Plan is intended

to broaden awareness of MassBays' unique role in the coastal management environment by enhancing communications and meaningful engagement with decisionmakers, communities, funding organizations, and other users about trends and conditions in the Bays and to prompt collaborative actions to address issues and improve ecosystem health.

MassBays will work to address the needs and recommendations identified in the 2026 Communications Plan and implement action items. It is important to note that these action items require dedicated and sustainable funding for successful implementation. With guidance from the 2026 Finance Strategy, MassBays aims to actively seek robust and sustainable funding to advance its mission and implement its CCMP.

This Communications Plan document will be reviewed every two years and updated as needed based on changing environmental issues, funding availability, partner projects, and organizational structures. The plan will be revised every ten years in conjunction with the CCMP.