

Emerald Coast Area Resilience Collaborative (EC-ARC) and MIRR Implementation Committee Meeting

Date: Wednesday, May 21, 2025

Time: 2:00 PM – 3:15 PM CST (3:00 PM – 4:15 PM EST)

Location: Online (MS Teams)

Attendees (54 total, some unidentified):

Joy Brown, Resilience Specialist, Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape
Eric Christianson, Planner III, Emerald Coast Regional Council
William "Sandy" Pizzolato, Eglin AFB
Kent Wimmer, Defenders of Wildlife
Angela Sanders UWF
Jeff Fanto, Eglin AFB / Hurlburt Field Work Group
John Skaggs, NSA Panama City
Steve Opalenik, NAS Pensacola
Randy Roy, NAS Whiting Field
Melinda Gates, Walton County
Tyler Reed, City of Mary Esther
Cynthia Cannon, City of Pensacola
Jacob Hullett, City of Milton
Ryan Kirby, Escambia County
Philip Schultz, City of Niceville
Kristen Shell, City of Niceville
John Whittington, Florida Department of Transportation
Malia Moritz, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Edward ODaniels, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Tiffany Lane, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Melanie Kaeser, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Robert Aldredge, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Debi Graham, Northwest Florida Defense Coalition
Chad Hanson, Pew Charitable Trusts
Zachary Greenberg, Pew Charitable Trusts
Ryann Rossi, Florida State University
Tricia Kyzar, University of Florida
Mehmet Oztan, Florida A&M University-FSU College of Engineering
Anna Turlik, Salas O'Brien
Justin Anderson, Salas O'Brien
Christie Rother, Salas O'Brien
Eric Schneider, Environmental Science Associates
Caroline Pryor, Cummins Cederberg

Will Mather, WSP
William Collins, The Nature Conservancy
Robert Bendick, The Nature Conservancy
Rick Harter, Living Shorelines

Minutes:

The meeting, which began at 2:00 PM CST, was attended by 54 participants, including stakeholders from local governments, military installations, environmental groups, and various agencies.

Eric Christianson, Community Planner at ECRC, opened the meeting with a brief overview of the Emerald Coast Area Resilience Collaborative (EC-ARC). He reiterated the collaborative nature of the group in implementing the Military Installation Resilience Review (MIRR) priorities and updating regional resilience strategies. Eric reminded the group of EC-ARC's responsibility in coordinating resilience efforts across the Emerald Coast region, particularly those supporting military installations and community infrastructure.

Eric shared news of the retirement of long-time Office of Local Defense Community Coordination (OLDCC) project manager Bill Van Houten and introduced Mauricio Castro as the new OLDCC contact. He noted progress on two installation readiness grants in the current funding cycle:

1. Bay County Water Treatment Plant Site Assessment, designed to reduce single points of failure for water supplies serving NSA Panama City, Tyndall AFB, and adjacent communities.
2. Mary Esther-Hurlburt Wastewater Forcemain, aimed at facilitating plant closures and regional wastewater conveyance.

A previously considered project for the US 98 Living Shoreline will no longer require additional design funding although they are still seeking funding sources for construction.

Eric discussed progress towards formation of local working groups to support implementation coordination and project reprioritization. He presented the existing MIRR project rankings, noting they had not been updated since mid-2024 and that local input was now being requested to reassess feasibility and funding readiness for each project.

He explained the ranking methodology, which weighs mission criticality, feasibility (including asset owner commitment and permitting status), available funding, and long-term benefit. Several MIRR-related transportation projects have now been incorporated into updated Long Range Transportation Plans (LRTPs) for our region's Transportation Planning Organizations.

Jeff Fanto, Eglin AFB – Hurlburt Field Working Group representative, reported on prioritized projects in his area of focus including:

- Improvements to State Roads 85 and 285, and US 98
- Power supply reliability
- Emergency communications upgrades
- Wastewater and stormwater system enhancements
- Shoreline protection measures

Jeff described the structure and purpose of the Eglin-Hurlburt implementation work group, noting its alignment with the Tri-County Partnership Initiative (TCPI). He also highlighted overlapping regional projects and noted that Col. Sterling with Eglin AFB is serving as the group's senior installation leader.

Jeff emphasized the regional benefit of the Mary Esther-Hurlburt Wastewater Forcemain project and explained that Eglin's own transition out of the wastewater utility business had provided a useful precedent. He also described progress on shoreline stabilization efforts to prevent erosion along US 98.

John Skaggs, Community Planning Liaison Officer (CPLO) NSA Panama City, emphasized the importance of water redundancy project and the recent success in moving these long term projects forward.

- The New Water Treatment Plant Site Assessment, now under OLDCC grant consideration
- A Bay County looped water supply to ensure continued service in the event of infrastructure failure

He also highlighted the long-awaited success of the Barefoot Palms site encroachment resolution, finalizing the addition of eight acres to NSA Panama City after over two decades of effort. Tyndall AFB coastal protection projects were also noted for their use of nature-based solutions and the beginning of Phase II of implementation soon.

Steve Opalenik, CPLO NAS Pensacola, described:

- The fully funded Living Shoreline Project along three miles of waterfront to enhance ecological and infrastructure resilience
- The South Navy Boulevard Improvement Project, which has advanced to design and public engagement stages, with further funding anticipated through competitive grants

Randy Roy, CPLO NAS Whiting Field, reported on:

- A phased strategy for resilient wastewater treatment led by the City of Milton
- Early-stage discussions with Florida Power & Light for a Whiting Field microgrid and solar project
- Progress on wildfire mitigation at Escambia Point
- Highway improvements and future DSIP grant applications supporting wastewater infrastructure upgrades and utility transfer

Eric Christianson briefly reported progress on Intergovernmental Support Agreements (IGSAs) in the region. While no new agreements have been finalized since the previous meeting, several are advancing and expected to close soon. EC-ARC continues to advocate for local governments and installations to pursue these agreements to improve efficiency and service delivery.

William "Sandy" Pizzolato delivered a presentation on his 30-year career managing wetlands and floodplains at Eglin AFB. He reviewed the successful recovery and eventual delisting of the Okaloosa darter, the first aquatic vertebrate to be removed from the Endangered Species List due to proactive conservation measures on a Department of Defense installation.

Sandy discussed the species' limited habitat, conservation challenges, and numerous stream restoration techniques used to restore natural flows, reconnect floodplains, and manage upland erosion. He emphasized the importance of long-term partnerships with USGS, USFWS, FWC, and local universities. The recovery was characterized by infrastructure removal, stream reconfiguration, pond decommissioning, and riparian rehabilitation across dozens of stream sites. The meeting adjourned at 3:15 PM CST.