

Final Evaluation Findings

Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve

August 2018 to February 2024

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Summary of Findings

The Coastal Zone Management Act requires the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Office for Coastal Management to conduct periodic evaluations of the operation and management of each national estuarine reserve participating in the National Estuarine Research Reserve System. This evaluation examined the operation and management of the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the designated lead agency, for the period from August 2018 to February 2024. The evaluation focused on three target areas: communication, natural resource management and restoration, and community engagement.

The findings in this evaluation document will be considered by the NOAA Office for Coastal Management in making future financial award decisions concerning the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve's management. The evaluation came to these conclusions:

Accomplishment: The Sapelo Island Research Reserve has increased its visibility with its partners and the public by developing innovative communication tools.

Accomplishment: The Sapelo Island Research Reserve has recently taken the lead in managing and restoring lands within the reserve boundaries.

Accomplishment: The Sapelo Island Research Reserve has revitalized the coastal training program and reoriented it to provide information to coastal management professionals, including real estate professionals.

Accomplishment: The Sapelo Island Research Reserve has hired a highly qualified group of professionals and is now fully staffed for the first time since 2017.

Recommendation: The NOAA Office for Coastal Management recommends that the Sapelo Island Research Reserve revise and finalize the reserve's draft communications plan and seek outside communications assistance in developing plans for recognizing the 50th anniversary of the reserve in 2026.

Recommendation: The NOAA Office for Coastal Management recommends that the Georgia Department of Natural Resources ensure adequate staffing to ensure the successful completion of restoration projects funded by NOAA and other sources.

Recommendation: The NOAA Office for Coastal Management recommends that the Sapelo Island Research Reserve continue building relationships with the Hogg Hummock community and other residents of Sapelo Island to help to ensure community resilience through facilitated dialogues, research presentations, and internships and other educational opportunities.

Recommendation: The NOAA Office for Coastal Management encourages the Georgia Department of Natural Resources to update and expand the Sapelo Island Visitors Center to modernize it and install exhibits focusing on coastal resilience and climate change and to further enhance accessibility for educational activities for the Sapelo Island Research Reserve and other groups.

Recommendation: The NOAA Office for Coastal Management encourages the Georgia Department of Natural Resources to examine methods to ensure that fleet vehicles are in working condition and available to the reserve to support necessary functions.

Necessary Action: The Sapelo Island Research Reserve must work closely with the Office for Coastal Management to submit a timeline for management plan approval three months from issuance of the final findings that addresses both the reserve's and Office for Coastal Management's tasks and (b) the final management plan must be completed by the agreed upon date in the approved timeline.

This evaluation concludes that the Georgia Department of Natural Resources is adhering to the programmatic requirements of the National Estuarine Research Reserve System in the operation of the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve.

Program Review Procedures

The Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1451 et. seq.), requires that national estuarine research reserves and state coastal zone management programs that are developed under the act and approved by the secretary of the Department of Commerce be evaluated periodically. Section 315 of the Coastal Zone Management Act and implementing regulations at 15 CFR Part 921, Subpart E, require that a research reserve be periodically evaluated with regard to 1) its operation and management, including education and interpretive activities; 2) the research being conducted within the research reserve; and 3) adherence to the requirements of section 315(b)(2) of the Coastal Zone Management Act.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) evaluated the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve in fiscal year 2024. The evaluation team consisted of Ralph Cantral, evaluation team lead; Stephanie Robinson, coastal management specialist and site liaison; Aranzazu Lascurain, Southeast and Caribbean regional lead; and Jenn Raulin, manager, Chesapeake Bay–Maryland Research Reserve. The support of Sapelo Island Research Reserve staff members was crucial in conducting the evaluation, and this support is most gratefully acknowledged.

NOAA sent a notification of the scheduled evaluation to Walter Rabon, commissioner of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, published a notice of “Intent to Evaluate” in the *Federal Register* on December 7, 2023, and notified members of Georgia’s congressional delegation. The reserve posted a notice of the public meeting and opportunity to comment in the *Darien News* on December 14, 2023, January 25, 2024, and February 1, 2024; and in the *Brunswick News* on December 12, 14, and 16, 2023, and February 3, 2024.

The evaluation process included a review of relevant documents and a survey of stakeholders, which helped identify three target areas for the evaluation: communication, natural resource management and restoration, and community engagement. A site visit was conducted, and the evaluation team held meetings with staff members and group discussions with stakeholders and program staff members about the target areas. In addition, a public meeting was held on Wednesday, February 7, 2023, at 6:30 p.m. at the Sapelo Island Visitors Center, 1766 Landing Road Southeast, Darien, GA 31305, to provide an opportunity for members of the public to express their opinions about the implementation of the program. Stakeholders and members of the public were also given the opportunity to provide written comments. A summary of the written comments received and the NOAA Office for Coastal Management’s responses are included in Appendix A. NOAA then developed draft evaluation findings, which were provided to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources for review, and the department’s comments were considered in drafting the final evaluation findings.

Final evaluation findings for each national estuarine research reserve highlight the reserve's accomplishments in the target areas and include two types of findings that may require action by the reserve.

Recommendations are actions that the office believes would improve the program, but which are not mandatory. The reserve is expected to have considered the recommendations by the time of the next evaluation or by the dates specified.

Necessary actions address programmatic requirements of the implementing regulations of the Coastal Zone Management Act and of the reserve's management plan approved by NOAA. These must be carried out by the dates specified. Failure to address necessary actions may result in a future finding of non-adherence and the invoking of interim sanctions, as specified in the Coastal Zone Management Act §312(c) and the implementing regulations at 15 CFR Part 921, Subpart E.

Evaluation Findings

Communication

The Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve is located on a barrier island accessible only by a ferry with limited travel times, so opportunities for the public to interact directly with the reserve are very limited. The reserve operates a visitors center on the mainland at the ferry dock that can provide various types of information to the casual visitor, but it is much harder for partners (researchers, teachers, students) to access the island to learn more about the reserve's resources and programs.

The research reserve partners with the Friends of Sapelo for many of its outreach efforts, including volunteering opportunities. Friends of Sapelo is not just focused on the research reserve, however, as it also is aligned with other entities on the island, including the Reynolds Mansion, a facility managed by Georgia State Parks. Friends of Sapelo distributes newsletters to more than 350 subscribers. These newsletters have been increasing in frequency lately, and this has become a more reliable way to share information about reserve activities.

During this evaluation period, the reserve has tried a number of methods to increase the level of communication with partners and the general public. The reserve contracted with an outside consulting firm to develop a communications plan for 2021 to 2024. This plan had two primary purposes: to increase public awareness of the reserve, and to increase the relevance of the reserve's communications products and activities to a broad audience of partners and visitors. A key component of this communications plan was to better integrate the reserve with the island's residents. [For more discussion of these community engagement activities, please refer to the section on "Community Engagement" below.]

Following recommendations in the 2019 evaluation, the reserve has initiated two new outreach efforts since the last evaluation. In August 2022, research reserve staff initiated a new podcast series called *Sapelo NERRds*. These podcasts, created by the assistant education coordinator and the coastal training program coordinator, have covered a variety of topics ranging from living shorelines to invasive species to the coastal turkey population. The podcasts are intended to bring news of interest to the local community and to encourage involvement in the reserve, as well as the greater scientific community. To reach a more professional audience, the coastal training program coordinator has also created an e-newsletter for the reserve's partners that features updates and articles related to each of the sectors of the reserve. The newsletter is distributed to a broad range of partners and also provides news of available resources such as trainings and funding opportunities.

Accomplishment: The Sapelo Island Research Reserve has increased its visibility with its partners and the public by developing innovative communication tools.

The Sapelo Island research reserve will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary in 2026. This anniversary will present a major opportunity to showcase the many accomplishments of the reserve. Any celebration will also provide an opportunity to inform the public, the reserve's partners, and Georgia state government of the goals of the reserve moving forward. To gain full advantage from this historic milestone, the reserve will need expert advice on developing materials and events. As the reserve does not have a communications officer, additional support from the professional communications staff at the Georgia Department of Natural Resources could be very helpful in designing an appropriate outreach strategy related to the fiftieth anniversary.

Recommendation: The NOAA Office for Coastal Management recommends that the Sapelo Island Research Reserve revise and finalize the reserve's draft communications plan and seek outside communications assistance in developing plans for recognizing the 50th anniversary of the reserve in 2026.

Internal communications among staff members had been mentioned as an issue in the 2019 evaluation of the reserve. As is discussed below in the administration and staffing section, the reserve is now fully staffed with very energetic and motivated individuals who are highly professional and respected in the community. The evaluation team learned that this team is instituting a very collaborative cross-sector approach that makes the staff more efficient in meeting the reserve's many goals.

Natural Resource Management and Restoration

The Sapelo Island Natural Estuarine Research Reserve is administered by the Wildlife Resources Division of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. Before this evaluation period, the majority of land management and land stewardship activities were conducted by the division through wildlife management area staff members who are also located on Sapelo Island. The roles and responsibilities of the research reserve staff have changed during the past two years, as the stewardship coordinator has become a key member of the group that sets land management goals and develops implementation strategies. This team also includes the Department of Natural Resources island manager, and wildlife management area leadership.

Four sites within the reserve have now been targeted for habitat restoration, with the highest priority being given to Airstrip Field, an area that was cleared to serve as a runway before the land was transferred to the state. The reserve intends to restore 35 acres of Airstrip Field to maritime forest, reestablishing a habitat that has been greatly reduced since European habitation of the island. A canopy of southern live oaks will help to increase resilience for the human communities on the island by serving as a buffer to coastal storms and protecting groundwater quality.

To facilitate the restoration, the reserve has established a greenhouse near the reserve headquarters on Sapelo Island. Reserve staff collected more than 1,000 acorns from existing native live oaks on the island to ensure that the trees used for the restoration were related to the native trees. The project is being done in cooperation with outreach foresters from New Mexico State and Purdue Universities. After proof of concept, the on-site greenhouse will be able to accommodate 1,500 seedlings each year.

The reserve also completed a major repair of the living shoreline near the reserve headquarters. This project, originally completed in 2010 in partnership with the Georgia Coastal Resources Division, had been damaged in 2018. The repair project enabled the reserve to make improvements using new materials and technologies that weren't available at the time of original construction.

Accomplishment: The Sapelo Island Research Reserve has recently taken the lead in managing and restoring lands within the reserve boundaries.

The most significant challenge the reserve's stewardship program is facing is having sufficient staff capacity to accomplish the ambitious work agenda that has been established, especially for projects that will be funded with new NOAA Research Reserve Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funds or other external funding sources. As mentioned above, the reserve has identified three additional major habitat restoration projects, in addition to a project that has already received NOAA funding, and that will elevate the frequently flooded portion of the nature trail that crosses Deans Creek Marsh. Management of several large restoration projects will exceed the capabilities of existing staff.

Recommendation: The NOAA Office for Coastal Management recommends that the Georgia Department of Natural Resources ensure adequate staffing to ensure the successful completion of restoration projects funded by NOAA and other sources.

Community Engagement

The Sapelo Island Research Reserve works to engage two separate and distinct communities as partners for engagement: residents of Sapelo Island and residents of McIntosh and Glynn Counties. The reserve's coastal training program has taken the lead in engaging with the professional communities and local officials in the area. During this evaluation period, the training program has been reinvigorated after being several years without a coordinator. Over the past two years, the coastal training program conducted a needs assessment with reserve stakeholders and instituted a new series of workshops with the reserve's partners. As of the time of the evaluation site visit, more than 20 workshops had been held, covering a broad range of topics identified through the needs assessment. The workshops have specifically targeted local municipalities, professional groups, and community leaders. One project specifically mentioned by stakeholders for its immediate utility was invasive species removal training for local public works departments.

The Sapelo Island coastal training program has also developed a real estate professionals training course, Coastal Communities 101, as this is a group that has been largely ignored in the past, but which is very important because of its interactions with existing and potential landowners in the coastal area. After a rigorous process, the course has been approved for continuing education credits for realtors and developers, which gives the intended audience a very real incentive to participate.

The coastal training program also coordinated with the Georgia Coastal Management Program to support two workshops for professionals involved in creating living shorelines. The workshops helped to lay the groundwork for the coastal management program to receive a grant from NOAA to install a living shoreline on Ossabaw Island. Participation with this project will continue, as the coastal training program plans to hold additional workshops to share lessons learned with audiences throughout the coastal area. These additional workshops will focus on the benefits to both the environmental and human environments, including the importance for protecting historical and archaeological resources.

Accomplishment: The Sapelo Island Research Reserve has revitalized the coastal training program and reoriented it to provide information to coastal management professionals, including real estate professionals.

Engaging with the Sapelo Island Community

Sapelo Island is a key component of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor administered by the National Park Service. The purpose of the corridor is to preserve, share, and interpret the history, cultural practices, heritage sites, and natural resources associated with the Gullah Geechee people of the southeastern United States. To effectively manage the resources of the island, the research reserve is attempting to find an effective way to engage with the Geechee people (both on and off the island) and learn from their culture while helping to make their community more resilient.

To provide a long-lasting bond between the reserve and the Hogg Hummock community, the principal community on Sapelo Island, the research reserve is providing match funding to support a Georgia Sea Grant Fellow working with the Sapelo Island Cultural and Revitalization Society. This organization is devoted to revitalizing Hogg Hummock in a manner that honors the connection between the culture and the environment of the island. The current focus of the fellowship is to learn about and mitigate the impacts of flooding on the island. The research reserve may want to explore other topics in the future and additional fellowship opportunities to create stronger links with the Hogg Hummock residents and other Geechee descendants.

The research reserve has pursued a program of engagement with the historical on-island communities that requires a very hands-on approach. This approach focuses on continuing dialogues, especially as they relate to traditional cultural practices, heritage sites, and traditional knowledge and their interaction with coastal resource conservation. To incorporate the experience of the residents of the community, the coastal training program has also created the Sapelo Flooding Photovoice project, which allows residents to take pictures of flooding in the community and upload the photos to a site. The reserve will then analyze the information and share it with local government officials to better inform them of the problems faced by island residents.

Recommendation: The NOAA Office for Coastal Management recommends that the Sapelo Island Research Reserve continue building relationships with the Hogg Hummock community and other residents of Sapelo Island to help to ensure community resilience through facilitated dialogues, research presentations, and internships and other educational opportunities.

The Sapelo Island Visitors Center is located adjacent to the mainland ferry dock. The center is administered by the research reserve, and several staff members work in that location. The center also serves as a key point of interaction with the mainland community, and public meetings are conducted in the venue. The site also provides a popular nature trail where visitors who are unable to visit the island can still learn about the local coastal environment. The reserve successfully replaced several sections of boardwalk during this evaluation period.

Unfortunately, the interpretive facilities at the visitors center have become outdated and need to be upgraded. The reserve's draft management plan proposes to improve the facilities at the visitors center so that it can become a "destination" attraction that would reach more of the public. To become such a destination, interpretive facilities in both the center and on the nature trails would need to be improved. NOAA procurement, acquisition, and construction funds could be used to provide part of the funding for these improvements.

Recommendation: The NOAA Office for Coastal Management encourages the Georgia Department of Natural Resources to update and expand the Sapelo Island Visitors Center to modernize it and install exhibits focusing on coastal resilience and climate change and to further enhance accessibility for educational activities for the Sapelo Island Research Reserve and other groups.

General Program Requirements

Administration and Staffing

The Sapelo Island Research Reserve had not been fully staffed since 2017, and had vacancies in key positions—the coastal training coordinator, stewardship coordinator, system-wide monitoring program manager, and assistant education coordinator—during this evaluation period. Although these vacancies impacted the reserve’s ability to accomplish some key tasks, the reserve has been able to move forward to implement some innovative initiatives and establish new relationships in the community since early 2022. The reserve is now fully staffed with very energetic and motivated individuals who are highly professional and respected in the community. The evaluation team learned that the current staff has developed a very collaborative cross-sector approach that makes the small staff more efficient in meeting its many goals.

Accomplishment: The Sapelo Island Research Reserve has hired a highly qualified group of professionals and is now fully staffed for the first time since 2017.

The evaluation team learned that one of the recurring issues with conducting necessary reserve activities on the island in a timely manner is the lack of vehicles available for reserve staff, and the unreliability of vehicles assigned to the reserve. Due to the remote nature of the island, repair services are not available without having to barge vehicles back to the mainland. Unfortunately, the reserve continues to receive vehicles that are at the end of their lifecycle, and the problems associated with the repair of vehicles persists.

Recommendation: The NOAA Office for Coastal Management encourages the Georgia Department of Natural Resources to examine methods to ensure that fleet vehicles are in working condition and available to the reserve to support necessary functions.

The 2019 evaluation of the Sapelo Island Research Reserve had the following necessary action:

2019 Necessary Action: The Sapelo Island Research Reserve’s current management plan expired in 2013 and therefore is more than five years out of compliance. The reserve must submit a full draft plan to NOAA by September 30, 2019.

At the time of the site visit in February 2024, the research reserve had provided a draft of the updated management plan for initial review, but a revised draft was necessary for continuing the update process. The NOAA Office for Coastal Management received a complete revised draft of the updated management plan on April 1, 2024.

Necessary Action: The Sapelo Island Research Reserve must work closely with the Office for Coastal Management to submit a timeline for management plan approval three months from issuance of the final findings that addresses both the reserve’s and Office for Coastal Management’s tasks, and (b) the final management plan must be completed by the agreed upon date in the approved timeline.

Research

During this evaluation period, the research reserve initiated a fish monitoring research program, which includes an Estuarine Fish Management Cooperative that enlists volunteers and interns to assist in a monthly sampling effort to fill critical gaps in estuarine biota data. In 2023, the reserve was awarded a National Estuarine Research Reserve System Science Collaborative transfer grant. The project will promote the results of the fish monitoring program by creating multi-media projects and training modules to pass along lessons learned.

Unfortunately, the reserve had difficulty keeping the system-wide monitoring program technician position filled but currently has a very well qualified individual in the position. The remote work location and the ferry schedules make the job a very demanding one, especially during nonwork hours.

Education

As with the research and monitoring programs mentioned above, the remote location of the reserve and access difficulties limit the number of students and teachers that can be accommodated for educational activities. This was especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic. At present, the program is attempting to reestablish pre-pandemic relationships in the schools of McIntosh and Glynn Counties. The reserve is also partnering with the St. Simons Land Trust, which conducts educational activities at Cannon's Point on St. Simons Island, since that will help to reach the students who can't journey to Sapelo Island.

Training

As mentioned under "Community Engagement" above, the coastal training program is making significant inroads in the community by developing programs to provide training to groups that have not been targeted by the reserve in the past. The new partnerships are being created by using the results of recent needs assessments as a guide.

Stewardship

As mentioned in the section on "Natural Resource Management and Restoration," the reserve's stewardship activities have expanded greatly during this evaluation period. The use of innovative techniques such as establishing a nursery to grow live oak seedlings to reestablish the maritime forest on Sapelo Island, and using new materials to repair damage to a living shoreline are to be commended.

Evaluation Metrics

Beginning in 2012, all national estuarine research reserves began tracking their success in addressing three evaluation metrics specific to their programs. The evaluation metrics include a five-year target and provide a quantitative reference for each program about how well it is meeting the goals and objectives it has identified as important to the program. In 2017, reserves began a new five-year period and set targets specific to their programs based on measures from existing National Estuarine Research Reserve System performance measures.

Evaluation Metrics: 2017 to 2022

Metric 1: Research and Monitoring Program

Goal: Improve the scientific understanding of estuaries and their watersheds through the development and application of reserve research, data, and tools.

Objective 2: Reserves and coastal researchers will increase their collaborative research to address the needs of decision-makers and stakeholders.

Strategies: Sapelo Island Reserve will continue to proactively pursue research objectives that have been identified in its management plan as well as pursue those not identified in the management plan but emerge as pressing issues to managers and stakeholders. The Reserve will collaborate with academic and regional partners to conduct the appropriate research to meet these objectives. To that end, the Sapelo Island Reserve has a research tracking program that captures information about research projects conducted within the reserve boundaries in a research database and ensures that researchers obtain the necessary permit approvals. The Reserve has three relevant strategies for maintaining this database:

1. Continue to promote the research tracking database, which includes primary researcher information concerning new scientific studies hosted by Sapelo Island Reserve, Sapelo Department of Natural Resources, or the University of Georgia Marine Institute (UGAMI). The database was developed with on-island partners, including the Georgia Coastal Ecosystems Long-Term Ecological Research program (GCE LTER) and UGAMI. The database was made available in 2011 to all researchers conducting field studies within the Reserve or on Sapelo, and is visible to the public.
2. The Georgia Coastal Ecosystems Long-Term Ecological Research program maintains its own research tracking database, given that its study domain extends well beyond the Reserve, and its proposal review process is internal to the program. The partnership between the GCE LTER and Sapelo Island Reserve allows GCE LTER scientists to conduct research within Reserve boundaries without direct Sapelo Island Reserve oversight. We will inventory these research projects annually from the GCE LTER database, for a full understanding of the research questions that are being actively pursued within the reserve boundaries but not directly facilitated by the reserve. We will continue to encourage collaboration with our on-island partners to coordinate research activities among programs.

3. We will direct researchers needing state permits to the coastal management program for permit approval prior to allowing project implementation, thus allowing the Georgia Coastal Management Program to track research that may be of high interest or value to Georgia coastal policy and management needs.

This measure will be tracked by calendar year (not cooperative agreement cycle) as the national research and monitoring database tracks projects by calendar year.

Performance measure: Between 2018 and 2022, total number of new research projects being carried out within the Sapelo Island Reserve.

Target: Between 2018 and 2022, 15 new research projects are being carried out within the Sapelo Island Reserve.

Results:

Year 1: 7

Year 2: 9

Year 3: 5

Year 4: 8

Year 5: 3

Total: 32 = 213 percent of target

Discussion: The research reserve has continued to encourage research and monitoring in the reserve and far exceeded the target for this evaluation period.

Metric 2: Education Program

Goal: Advance environmental appreciation and scientific literacy, allowing for science-based decisions that positively affect estuaries, watersheds, and coastal communities.

Objective 2: Educators and students will better understand and use reserve system and NOAA resources for place-based and inquiry-based learning.

Strategies: Conduct K through 12 student and teacher programs to increase environmental literacy and stewardship of estuarine and coastal ecosystems. Continue to build upon Sapelo Island Reserve's reputation as a high-quality source for scientific knowledge about estuarine ecological processes and species life histories, as well as important research, monitoring and conservation efforts along the Georgia coast. The reserve's curriculum will be continuously updated to reflect current scientific knowledge of the Georgia coast. This has been, and will continue to be, a reason why regional schools and educators choose to visit the reserve, over other available programs along the coast. The Reserve will engage and inform educators about Reserve educational opportunities during school visits, via social media, and through our participation in organizations such as the Georgia Association of Marine Educators, and the

Georgia Coastal Educators Group. Reserve educational programming will also be showcased at public outreach events, such as Coastfest, Cultural Day, Coastal Day at the Capitol, Beach Week, and others.

This measure is the “Number of P-12 students” plus the “undergraduate” subcategory of the measure “Number of postsecondary students” in the national KNACK database.

Performance measure: Between 2017 and 2022, total number of P-16 students participate in reserve on- and off-site education programs.

Target: Between 2017 and 2022, a total of 6,500 P-16 students (1,300 per year average) participate in reserve on- and off-site education programs.

Results:

Year 1: 2,148

Year 2: 1,905

Year 3: 646

Year 4: 219

Year 5: 528

Total: 5,446 = 87 percent of goal

Discussion: The number of education trips to Sapelo Island fell during the COVID-19 pandemic. As mentioned in the section related to education (above), the reserve is working to reestablish relationships with the local school districts and establish new partnerships to reach new student audiences.

Metric 3: Coastal Training Program

Goal: Advance environmental appreciation and scientific literacy, allowing for science-based decisions that positively affect estuaries, watersheds, and coastal communities.

Objective 2: Coastal decision-makers and environmental professionals will understand and effectively apply science-based tools, information, and planning approaches that support resilient estuaries and coastal communities.

Strategies: The Coastal Training Program will develop and conduct workshops and trainings that incorporate the most current science and that are relevant to local coastal decision-maker needs. We will use the results of periodic needs assessment and market analysis surveys to develop training programs that address coastal decision-maker needs and priorities. The trainings will provide essential skills and knowledge to assist coastal decision-makers in carrying out their jobs. Training participants will be given a post-training survey to evaluate the effectiveness of training programs and assist with future improvements of the coastal training

program. Among other questions, the surveys will ask participants if their knowledge or skills have increased as a result of attending the workshop or training program.

Performance measure: Between 2017 and 2022, percent of participants in Reserve-led or facilitated workshops and trainings sessions reporting that their knowledge and skills increased as a result of the workshop or training.

Target: Between 2017 and 2022, 93 percent of participants in reserve-led or facilitated workshops and trainings sessions will report that their knowledge and skills increased as a result of the workshop or training.

Results:

Year 1: 100%

Year 2: no trainings held

Year 3: no trainings held

Year 4: no trainings held

Year 5: 97.4%

Total: 99%

Discussion: The reserve was unable to conduct trainings during years two through four of the evaluation period because of complications related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of a training coordinator during a portion of those years. Year one and year five exceeded the goal, indicating that the reserve training programs continue to provide useful information to participants.

Conclusion

For the reasons stated herein, I find that the State of Georgia Department of Natural Resources' operation and management of the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve, including education, research, and interpretative activities, is adhering to the terms of the reserve's financial assistance awards and the programmatic requirements of the Coastal Zone Management Act and its implementing regulations.

These evaluation findings contain one necessary action that must be completed by the date given and five recommendations that must be considered before the next regularly scheduled program evaluation but that are not mandatory at this time. Recommendations that must be repeated in subsequent evaluations may be elevated to necessary actions.

This is a programmatic evaluation of the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve, which may have implications regarding the state's financial assistance awards. However, it does not make any judgment about or replace any financial audits.

Jeffrey L. Payne, Ph.D.
Director, NOAA Office for Coastal Management

Date

Appendix A: Response to Written Comments

The NOAA Office for Coastal Management received written comments on the evaluation of the Sapelo Island Research Reserve from three individuals.

Damon Gannon, the former assistant director of the University of Georgia Marine Institute, spoke about how helpful the research reserve's education coordinator and assistant coordinator have been in introducing students to the natural history of the island.

Mardee Sanchez, engineering director of the Liberty Consolidated Planning Commission, spoke about how helpful the coastal training workshops have been to her personally, and how well the workshops are aimed at providing useful information for planning and development officials working in the coastal environment.

Richard Holcomb, chairman of the Coastal Soil and Water Conservation District, praised the education and research programs as being a vital resource for the coastal counties within the conservation district. He described two specific activities that were helpful: a partnership to prepare and deliver a training program on feral hogs, and a trip by the conservation district supervisors to the reserve to learn about living shorelines.

The evaluation team thanks the commenters for providing these helpful comments.