

Chelsea Jones- NRM CAP (January – July 2025)

I knew the Natural Resources Management (NRM) Career Assignment Program (CAP) with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) would be a transformative, career-defining experience. I had dreamed of being selected for this opportunity since I was a brand-new Ranger, still learning the basics—like understanding the chain of command—and feeling worlds away from the brilliant minds at the District Office, let alone the cape-wearing heroes at HQUSACE.

As I grew professionally into a Lake Manager, Area Manager, and ultimately an NRM Specialist in my home district of Pittsburgh, I began to better understand the organization's goals and recognized the CAP as something worth pursuing—again and again—for even a chance to be selected. I looked up to “the greats” who served in this role before me, reading about their journeys and taking note of the doors it had opened for them. Over time, I realized the CAP was not just for the elite few—it was a unique opportunity available to NRM professionals from all backgrounds and experience levels. Their advice was consistent: “Go for it.” So, I did—and I was fortunate to be selected.

What I didn't expect was just how accurate that advice would prove to be. The CAP delivered everything it promised: a broader understanding of Headquarters operations, and something even more impactful—realizing that the HQUSACE heroes I had long admired are regular, down-to-earth people who are passionate, capable, and genuinely supportive. Jeff Krause has truly assembled one of the most skilled and personable teams.

Each CAP experience is unique. Mine was entirely virtual, set against the backdrop of a change in administration, a federal travel ban, new executive orders, return to work in person (RTWIP), and the rollout of the Deferred Retirement Program (DRP) and DRP 2.0. Despite these challenges, the HQ NRM team went out of their way to make me feel welcome and valued from day one—and that never wavered. This sense of belonging and support was, without a doubt, the most rewarding part of the experience (and there were many).

I suspect the statement “once a CAP, always a CAP” might ring true with this amazing team, and I am proud to be part of that. I took great pride in contributing to national programs and initiatives, serving on national teams, shaping policy and correspondence, and supporting the field during a uniquely challenging time of transition and adaptation.

If you're willing to embrace uncertainty for a chance at professional growth and want to deepen your understanding of the complex processes that drive national-level operations, I encourage you to apply—regardless of your career stage. There will never be a “perfect time” to step outside your comfort zone, but I promise, you won't regret it.

The NRM CAP isn't just a temporary detail—it's a once-in-a-career opportunity that broadens your perspective, strengthens your network, and deepens your appreciation for the USACE mission at both the local and national levels. I walked away with a stronger sense of purpose, greater confidence, and a renewed connection to the Corps' mission.

Thank you to my direct supervisor and home district for supporting me in pursuing this opportunity, and to the entire HQUSACE team for taking a chance on me.