

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT



## BACKGROUND AND RESTORATION GOALS

### BACKGROUND

#### Executive Order

October 5, 2010, President Barack Obama issued Executive Order 13554 (the Order), establishing the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force (Task Force), and it is from the Order that the Task Force draws its charge. The driver for the Order was the Deepwater Horizon spill, which the President termed “the worst environmental disaster America has ever faced.” This disaster, coupled with a series of complex issues, has contributed to the Gulf of Mexico’s long-term ecological decline. In the Order, President Obama directed the federal government to work with the five states, local governments and tribes to help conserve and restore resilient and healthy ecosystems which support the surrounding regions’ economies, communities and cultures.

The Task Force is directed to develop a restoration strategy that sets forth ecosystem restoration goals and performance measures to track progress on shared priorities. The strategy is due to the President October 5, 2011. Specifically, the Executive Order mandates that the Task Force:

- 1) Define restoration goals and identify milestones for measuring progress towards achieving those goals;
- 2) Review existing research, efforts and initiatives that can contribute to restoration of the Gulf;
- 3) Identify areas where different levels and sectors of government can work together on strategy implementation;
- 4) Propose new programs or initiatives where there are gaps in restoration capabilities; and
- 5) Identify science, research and data collection needs required to inform effective restoration.

#### Public Input

Beginning with its first meeting on November 8, 2010, the Task Force initiated a wide range of targeted outreach mechanisms to directly engage and solicit input from the general public and key stakeholder groups throughout the region. To date, more than 1,000 members of the public have personally participated and provided invaluable suggestions that have contributed to the Task Force’s work to develop its restoration strategy. Additionally, the Task Force reviewed more than 130 state and federal publications and data links dealing with Gulf of Mexico restoration for commonality of focus and priority. This input has led the Task Force to narrow its focus to the following priority areas:

- Enhance Community Resilience
- Restore and Conserve Habitat
- Restore Water Quality
- Replenish and Protect Living Coastal and Marine Resources

The Task Force proposes that these priority areas serve as the overarching restoration goals, and it will identify specific actions that will help achieve these goals.

### ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION GOALS

#### Goal 1: Enhance Community Resilience

The Gulf Coast communities face a number of pressing challenges, such as storm risk, sea-level rise, land and habitat loss, depletion of natural resources, and compromised water quality that affect the economy as well as the health and quality of life of its citizens. Decision-makers at all levels of government are facing unprecedented challenges and complex choices to protect and sustain their communities in light of deteriorating environmental

and economic conditions. A primary focus should be to use science-based decision tools, methods and supporting techniques at the federal, state and local government levels to strengthen the resilience of communities. Another focus should be to effectively support communities in their efforts towards ecosystem restoration, and to connect them with other programs, such as health and economic recovery services.

### **Goal 2: Restore and Conserve Habitat**

For decades, the Gulf Coast has endured extensive damage to key habitats such as coastal wetlands, estuaries, barrier islands, upland habitats, seagrass beds, oyster reefs, corals, and offshore habitats. Decision-makers face the challenge of restoring and protecting these important habitats, while ensuring the economic needs of a resilient working coast. A primary focus should be to work with Gulf Coast stakeholders to improve the effectiveness of state and federal conservation and navigation management, develop habitat conservation and restoration strategies, and take actions that consider the varying, and sometimes competing, needs.

### **Goal 3: Restore Water Quality**

For too long, the Gulf of Mexico has suffered from numerous types of water quality problems, including excess nutrients, sediments, pathogens, mercury, and other pollutants. One of the most visible signs of water quality challenges in the Gulf of Mexico is hypoxia, low oxygen levels in the water, which can result from excess nutrients in the water in addition to other factors. Decision-makers face the reality that restoring and enhancing water quality will require collaboration with upstream communities. A primary focus should be to use careful science-based review and innovative approaches to enhance water quality.

### **Goal 4: Replenish and Protect Living Coastal and Marine Resources**

Living coastal and marine resources are showing visible signs of distress, such as depleted species population and degraded habitats. Decision-makers must protect these resources and allow them to survive and thrive in a changing environment, while supporting the needs of communities who depend on them for their livelihoods. A primary focus should be to strengthen and build programs to promote resource management that focuses on the needs and functions of the ecosystem as a whole, facilitating improved fisheries management and species protection efforts.

## **FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS**

Long-term Gulf Coast restoration will take significant commitments from everyone. Some foundational elements to help achieve restoration priorities could include, and are not limited to:

- **Science-based Adaptive Management**  
Formulate an adaptive, science-based framework to inform decision-making, build upon existing knowledge, and anticipate and meet emerging needs.
- **Community Engagement, Outreach and Education**  
Continue to communicate with stakeholders, elected leaders, citizens and indigenous populations and promote dialogue on restoration strategy development, and provide opportunities to engage in the process.
- **Regional, State and Local Implementation Efforts**  
Build on collaborative working relationships to facilitate, utilize, empower, and enable programs and partnerships to deliver restoration and protection results.
- **International Collaboration**  
Cooperate with international partners to address transnational areas of concern, building on existing programs and creating new ones.
- **Consultation and Coordination with Tribes**  
Conduct ongoing consultation and coordination with a focus on Gulf states' tribes.

