

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force Final Strategy

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q. What messages did the Task Force receive from the public and how did this input impact today's released Final Strategy?

A. On October 5th, 2010, the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force released for public review and feedback a Preliminary Strategy for Gulf of Mexico ecosystem restoration. During that time, we received more than 13,000 comments from citizens, tribes and organizations, and these voices of the Gulf loudly called for putting plans into action. The predominant message was the desire to see the priorities identified in the Strategy implemented as soon as possible. We also heard strong support for the long-term restoration plan, and for the focus on the four goals presented in the Preliminary Strategy. The Task Force is thankful for this information and looks forward to taking the next steps towards restoration.

Q. What are the next steps?

Today, we take an important step towards recovery and shift from planning to action. As outlined in the Strategy, the Task Force will begin immediately to assess specific projects and required resources that will help achieve the recommendations of the Strategy. While some of these recommendations may require additional resources, we can accomplish others by better aligning existing federal and state resources and prioritizing restoration work for key problems of ecological decline in the Gulf. The Task Force is now able to invest more time in identifying lead agencies, partners, and resources that can be leveraged within existing structures to support urgently-needed restoration projects. Through continued partnerships across all levels of government, and by building innovative partnerships among public and private entities, we can take significant steps towards achieving the common goal of ecosystem restoration. These relationships will not only ensure effective use of resources, but also will foster a collaborative approach for ensuring the Gulf Coast thrives for many generations to come.

Additionally, the Task Force will open an office on the Gulf Coast within the next month. It will be co-located with other federal agencies at the Stennis Space Center in Mississippi. John Hankinson will remain Executive Director of the Task Force and continue his service from Mississippi. As the Task Force shifts its work towards implementation, it is important to have part of our leadership on the ground in the Gulf to work with those living and working in the Gulf.

Q. What is the Gulf of Mexico Initiative (GoMI) and how will the funds support the Strategy?

The Strategy identified reducing the flow of excess nutrients as one of the most pressing environmental concerns in the Gulf. The Task Force marks the beginning of the

implementation phase of the strategy by announcing new initiatives, announcing new initiatives, including \$50 million in assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service's to help agricultural producers in seven Gulf Coast river basins improve water quality, increase water conservation and enhance wildlife habitat.

USDA's multi-year environmental restoration effort, known as the Gulf of Mexico Initiative, or GoMI, represents a 1,100% increase in financial assistance for Gulf priority watersheds. NRCS selected seven river basins in the Gulf States for targeted financial assistance for agricultural producers to improve water quality, increase water conservation and enhance wildlife habitat. Working with state and federal agencies, local partners, and producers, NRCS has identified the following watersheds for this targeted technical and financial assistance: Weeks Bay in Alabama, the Escambia River in Alabama and Florida, the middle Suwannee River area in Florida, the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary and Mermentau Basin in Louisiana, the Jourdan River in Mississippi, and the lower San Antonio River in Texas.

Q. **How does this Strategy differ from other restoration plans, particularly the Mabus Report?**

Immediately following the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill, one of the worst man-made environmental disasters our country has ever experienced, President Obama directed Navy Secretary Ray Mabus to determine what comes next to restore the Gulf Coast ecosystems and economies. In his report, *America's Gulf Coast: A Long Term Recovery Plan after the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill*, Secretary Mabus put forward a restoration plan, including a call for Congress to dedicate funds to go toward addressing long-term recovery and restoration efforts in the Gulf. Secretary Mabus recommended the establishment of the Task Force consisting of many members of federal and state agencies to continue the development of restoration efforts and serve as a bridge depending on the time needed for Congressional action.

The members of the Task Force were directed by the President to prepare an ecosystem Strategy. This Strategy – the first effort of its kind to be developed with the involvement of parties throughout the region, including the states, tribes, federal agencies, local governments and thousands of interested citizens and organizations – builds upon the the work of Secretary Mabus. The Strategy builds a foundation for: better coordination and alignment of existing work along the Gulf coast; the identification of strategic investment opportunities; and development of milestones and measures to track progress in improving this invaluable ecosystem resource.

Q. **What are the major recommendations addressed in the strategy?**

A. The Strategy responds to the long-standing decline of the Gulf region's ecosystem. These natural resources are vital in that they support much of the economic wellbeing of the area – like tourism and recreation, energy production, and fishing and seafood

sales. The strategy addresses several key areas of concern, among them stopping the loss of critical wetlands like sand barriers and beaches.

The strategy also addresses the need to reduce the amount of excess nutrients flowing into the Gulf. The overload of excess nutrients can create hypoxic or oxygen starved areas where important coastal and marine creatures can't survive. Excess nutrients coming down the Mississippi alone has created the second largest "dead zone" in the world in the Gulf.

The strategy points out the need for more action to enhance the resiliency of coastal communities. Those communities have long been at increased risk from storm and sea level changes and other environmental impacts.

The strategy also calls for enhancing the quality of life for people in the Gulf by working in partnership with Gulf with coastal communities themselves utilizing local planning programs and ideas.

Q: What does the Task Force identify as the most pressing environmental concern currently being faced in the Gulf?

A. At the top of our list of priorities is restoring the supply of sediment needed to build up eroding wetlands, sand barriers and beaches; reducing the flow of nutrients which have contributed to the creation a "dead zone" in the Gulf; and helping coastal communities develop improved resiliency against environmental impacts from things like storms and sea level changes.

Together, the Gulf's tourism and commercial and recreational fishing industries make a significant contribution to the United States economy. More than 90 percent of the Nation's offshore oil and gas is produced in the Gulf, and it is where nearly one-third of seafood production in the continental United States is harvested. This strategy, and this Task Force represent an historic opportunity to stop the loss of wetlands, sand barriers, beaches and natural beauty that support those activities.

Q. Why did the Task Force release the report in draft form and ask for public feedback?

A. The strategy is the product of more than 40 public meetings and listening sessions over the last year throughout the Gulf region. That is why, before the strategy was finalized, we wanted to give the public, especially those in the Gulf region, an opportunity to review and provide feedback. That we received such positive comments on the Strategy from the citizens and supporters of the Gulf further validates that the process for gathering input to establish the goals was the right one. We wanted this strategy to be as informed as much as possible by the people who will help with the solutions and benefit the most from improvements.

Q: How did the Task Force develop the strategy?

A. The first step was Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus's report on Gulf restoration, in which he red flagged the long-term decline of resources as a major concern to be addressed. Following Secretary Mabus's recommendation, President Obama created the Task Force to address the Gulf's longstanding ecological decline and to develop a strategy to move toward a more resilient Gulf Coast ecosystem. The Task Force includes all five Gulf states as well as federal agencies. For the last year the Task Force has listened to the people of the Gulf during more than 40 public meetings. We've heard concerns and ideas for moving forward from fisherman, environmental experts, scientists, local officials, concerned citizens and business owners. The Task Force members and countless citizens who have helped all form an unprecedented coalition and an historic opportunity for change.

Q: How will the Task Force implement and fund the strategy released today?

A. The work of the Task Force does not stop with the release of the final strategy. The purpose of the Task Force is to set strategic direction and to accelerate restoration by working with the implementing agencies to resolve barriers to progress and to identify and leverage available resources. The Task Force is now shifting gears to assess specific projects and required resources that will help achieve the recommendations. While some of these recommendations may require additional resources, others can be accomplished by better aligning existing resources and targeting restoration work to the key problems. The Task Force will be identifying lead agencies, partners, and resource needs that can be included in various budget proposals. The way forward is affordable and doable – and will result in major benefits for the Gulf region.

Q: What is the current state of the Gulf Coast's ecosystem?

A. Our report speaks to long-standing threats from the decline of the region's ecosystem – an ecosystem that the Gulf states and the Nation depend upon for much of our economic wellbeing. The loss of wetlands and beaches directly impacts tourism and recreation. The loss of wildlife habitats directly affects seafood catches and sales. Nutrient problems can lead to "dead zones" which also impact fishing and the seafood industry. In Louisiana alone, on average an area of wetlands the size of a football field turns into open water every 38 minutes, over time an area of almost 2000 square miles. The region already has lost about half its wetlands -- a loss that continues unabated. Key habitats for a wide range of fish and other animals are being lost or reduced across the Gulf. The creation of channels and levees from dredging in the Lower Mississippi often can "disconnect" the vast wetland delta from the source of sediments that built the delta over thousands of years. These are serious and urgent problems that have been growing for a long time and are reaching a critical mass – problems that the strategy addresses – and probably the biggest threat to the region at the moment.

Q: What specific environmental damage was caused by the oil spill?

A. The *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill caused vast damage to the natural resources of the Gulf of Mexico. The extent of this damage is currently being assessed by the Natural Resources Damage Assessment process led by certain federal agencies and the five Gulf

Coast states. For more information, please visit:

http://www.fws.gov/contaminants/pdf/NRDAR_Program_2-10-05.pdf. For our purposes, however, the bigger threats to the Gulf ecosystem involve the startling loss of wetlands, sand barriers and beaches – resources that contribute to the economy greatly.

Q. Does the Administration support SB 1400, the Gulf Recovery Act?

A. The Strategy reaffirms the President’s call for a substantial amount of Clean Water Act penalties obtained in the Deepwater Horizon oil spill litigation to be returned to the Gulf for recovery activities and for a council to be established to oversee these recovery activities and investments.

Q. Where can members of the public go to review the final strategy?

A. The final strategy is available to the public for review at:
www.epa.gov/gulfcoasttaskforce.

Q. Will the strategy be available for non-English speakers?

A. Yes. Recognizing the large populations of non-English speaking stakeholders in the Gulf states, the Gulf of Mexico Regional Ecosystem Restoration Final Strategy will be available in both Spanish and Vietnamese. These documents are available on our website, www.epa.gov/gulfcoasttaskforce. We are working with some of the leaders of these communities to inform them of the translated documents and encourage its distribution.

Q. Who are the members of the Task Force?

A. The Task Force is made up of representatives from the five Gulf states and 11 federal agencies, including the Environmental Protection Agency, Council on Environmental Quality, Department of Interior, Department of Commerce, Department of Defense, Department of Agriculture, Department of Justice, Department of Transportation, Office of Management and Budget, Office of Science and Technology Policy and Domestic Policy Council. The five states are: Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. The names of each member and their bios are here:
<http://epa.gov/gulfcoasttaskforce/members.html>.

Q. Where can I read the president’s Executive Order that created the Task Force?

A. More information on the president’s executive order: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/10/05/executive-order-gulf-coast-ecosystem-restoration-task-force>.