

**Gulf of Mexico
Ecosystem Restoration
Listening Sessions Report**

Gulf of Mexico Program – US EPA
March 2015

Introduction / Background

The Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities, and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States Act (RESTORE Act), signed into law in July 2012, established a Gulf Coast Restoration Trust Fund (Trust Fund) which will receive 80 percent of the civil and administrative Clean Water Act penalties resulting from the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill. The Trust Fund supports five restoration components aimed at restoring the long-term health of the valuable natural ecosystems and economy of the Gulf Coast Region.

Thirty percent of the money directed to the Trust Fund is managed by the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (Council) to implement ecosystem restoration following a Comprehensive Plan¹, developed by the Council with input from the public to restore the ecosystem of the Gulf Coast Region. This 30%, of which approximately \$150 - \$180 million is available for project and programs, is referred to as the Council Selected Component.

The Funded Priorities List

Once the Council has selected which projects and programs it intends to prioritize for funding, it will publish those selections in the form of a draft “Funded Priorities List” (FPL). The draft FPL will be made available for public review and comment. After consideration of public input, the Council will make changes as appropriate, and finalize the FPL.

Between August and November of 2014, the Council collected 50 project and program proposals from its members for possible inclusion on the Funded Priorities List. From December 2014 through February 2015 Council conducted reviews of the proposals received – including an independent science review performed by panels of scientists and restoration practitioners outside the authority of the Council.²

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is one of eleven members of the Council. As such, the Agency seeks to support Council activities and influence project and program selection that will provide the greatest benefit to the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem *and the people who rely on the health of that ecosystem*. As an organization driven by sound science, EPA will rely heavily on the results of both the external science reviews as well as its own internal science reviews. That reliance on sound science notwithstanding, EPA also wishes to weigh the public’s views about which project and program proposals to support since the ultimate outcome of Council activities is to improve the lives of people who rely on the health of the Gulf ecosystem. This report describes the methods the Agency used to gather public input on the proposals currently before the Council and provides results of those activities.

Methodology

Gauging public interest about the best ways to promote ecosystem and economic restoration across an area as large as the Gulf of Mexico region is complex. Environmental issues and potential restoration strategies and techniques vary widely and are to a great extent location-dependent. While many communities throughout the Gulf share similar environmental stressors, setting priorities about which

¹ <http://www.restorethegulf.gov/sites/default/files/Final%20Initial%20Comprehensive%20Plan.pdf>

² <https://www.restorethegulf.gov/release/2015/03/12/council-selected-restoration-component-proposals-and-context-reports>

of those issues to focus limited resources on is heavily and appropriately influenced by localized needs. For example, there are many places across the Gulf where urban storm water issues are degrading water quality in and around coastal aquatic systems. There is likely general agreement across the Gulf that these issues need to be addressed. In some places however, coastal communities are experiencing profound land loss issues or serious fresh water in-flow issues that would by local communities be given funding priority over storm water issues. The examples listed above are illustrative only and represent a mere fraction of the environmental matters which should be addressed if sufficient funding were made available. These examples are only used to underscore the diversity, complexity, and localized nature of both problem identification and priority setting. Given these realities, it is not surprising that if one were to ask what specific projects a particular community in a particular State would like to see funded, the community would likely opt to fund projects in their community. To be clear, such a community choice would not necessarily be made out of selfishness to support their own community at the expense of another but rather out of a clearer understanding of local issues and needs.

Herein lies a primary challenge of getting meaningful public input. Public opinion is, and should be, influenced by localized issues. Yet decision-makers, like EPA and indeed the broader RESTORE Council are required to act broadly, across the entire Gulf ecosystem when setting funding priorities.

To meet this challenge, EPA chose to engage at the local level, to hear local concerns, but to do so in a way that informed broad, Gulf-wide thinking. Rather than focus on the specifics of the 50 proposals before the Council, EPA opted to pull from the 50 proposals broad restoration themes represented by the proposals. Public participants were then asked to prioritize among those themes – without tying directly back to any given specific project proposal. Further, nested inside each of the themes was a corresponding list of associated restoration activities. These activities were pulled from specifics in the 50 proposals currently before the Council but presented at a level so as not to be tied to any specific proposal. Participants were asked to prioritize among the activities.

Ocean Conservancy as a Strategic Partner

Because EPA is itself a RESTORE Council member that has submitted its own project proposals for funding consideration, the Agency thought it appropriate to ask a third party – one outside the Agency and the RESTORE Council and one which has no direct financial interest in the selection of one proposal over another – to perform the analysis needed to break the 50 individual proposals into their constituent parts – the aforementioned broad themes and related activities. This analysis was performed by Ocean Conservancy, Gulf Restoration Program Office. The resulting short input document (see Appendix A of this report) served as the focal point of the listening sessions conducted throughout the Gulf.

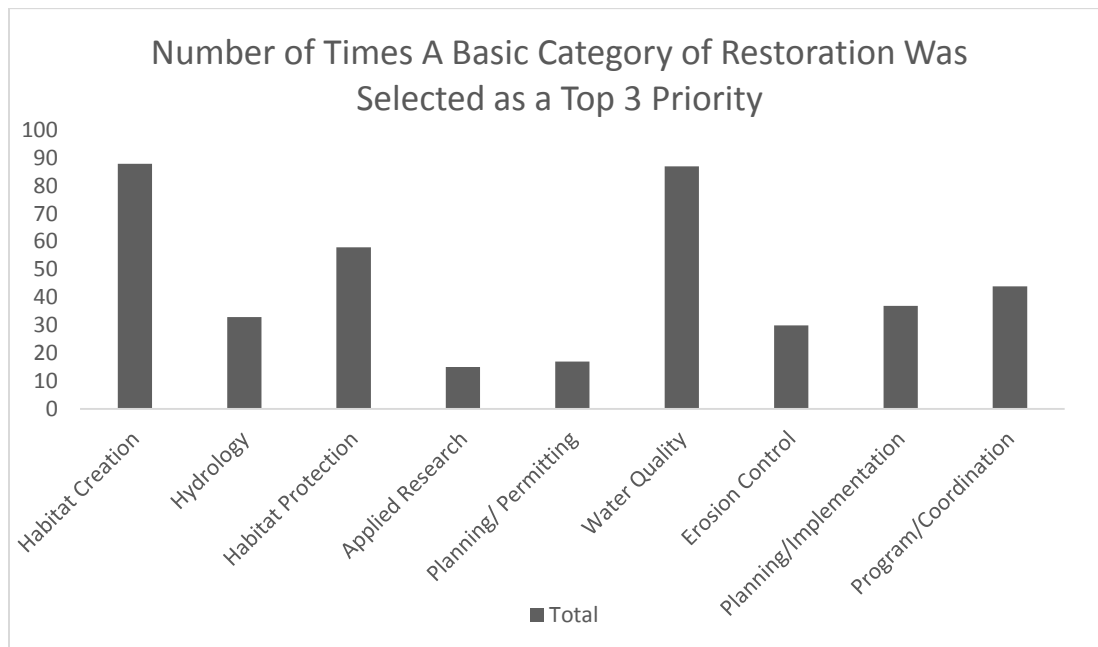
Listening sessions were held in each of the Gulf States in February 2015. At each session, a brief overview of the EPA's role on the RESTORE Council as it relates to the development of the Funded Priorities List was presented. The participants were placed in small groups of 8-10 people and led through a facilitated discussion of the priority setting document. Each participant was asked to complete their own priority setting document. Because the focus of the listening sessions was to solicit input from all individuals, consensus within the smaller groups was not sought. The listening sessions were organized and facilitated by an EPA-Ocean Conservancy team. Facilitators were also brought in from Nature Conservancy, National Wildlife Federation, Gulf Restoration Network, Alabama Coastal

Foundation, and the Mississippi Environment Focus Group. 155 individuals participated in the listening sessions.

RESULTS

Not surprisingly, input received reflects the same broad diversity of thought as is reflected in the diversity of issues facing the Gulf. A complete set of results data is found at Appendix B.

Summary data for prioritization among the broad themes is found below:



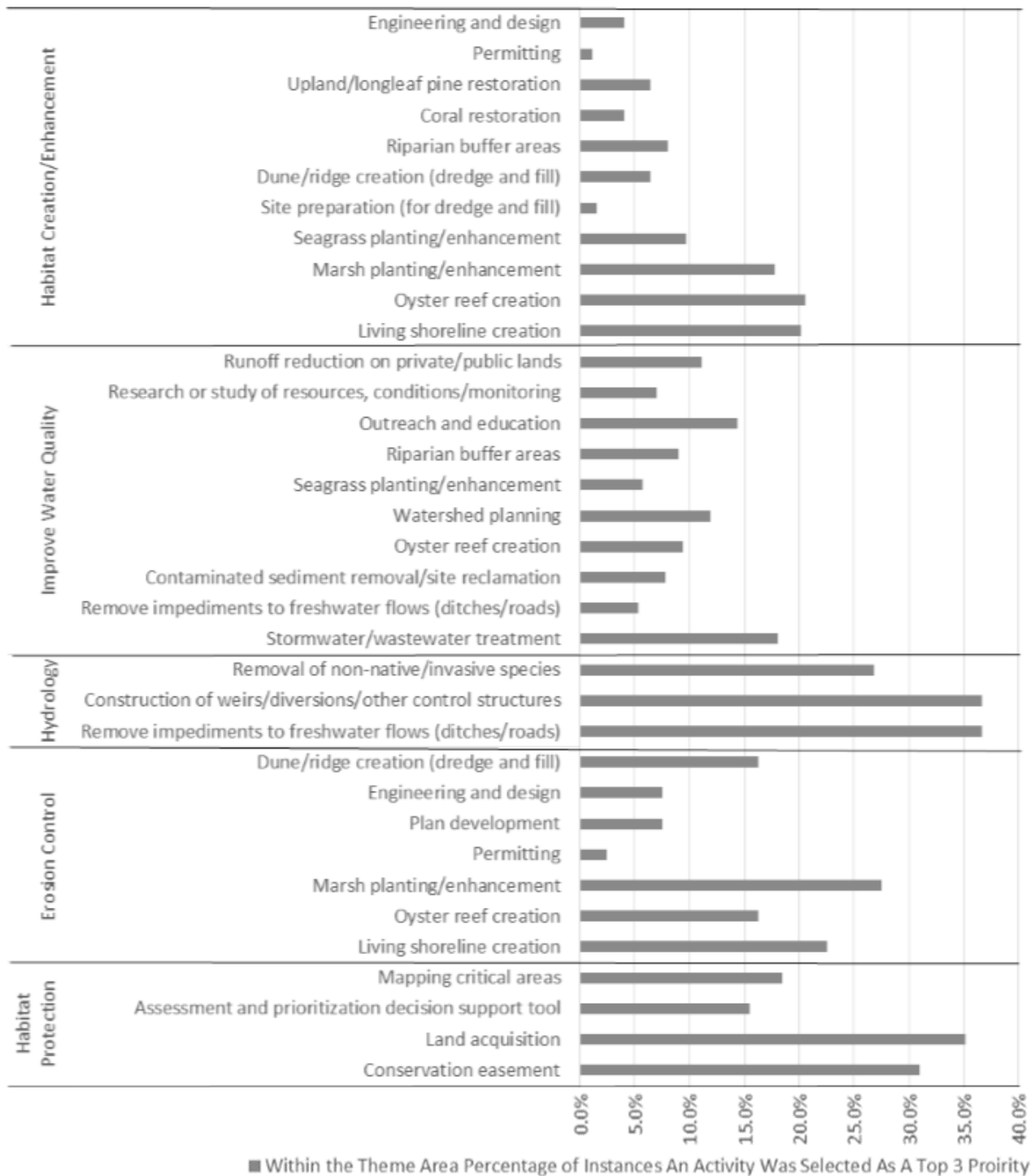
No one basic category or theme received a majority (50%+) response. Habitat Creation/Enhancement, Improvements to Water Quality, and Habitat Protection were the three most often prioritized themes. This is not surprising given that the RESTORE Council chose to focus this first instance of the Funded Priorities List on Habitat and Water Quality – and all proposals submitted contained Habitat and Water Quality components.

The relative spread of responses across all categories (i.e. no one theme was largely ignored), seems to suggest that, at least with this group of Gulf-wide respondents, a broad, balanced, integrated approach to the Funded Priorities List will likely be well received.

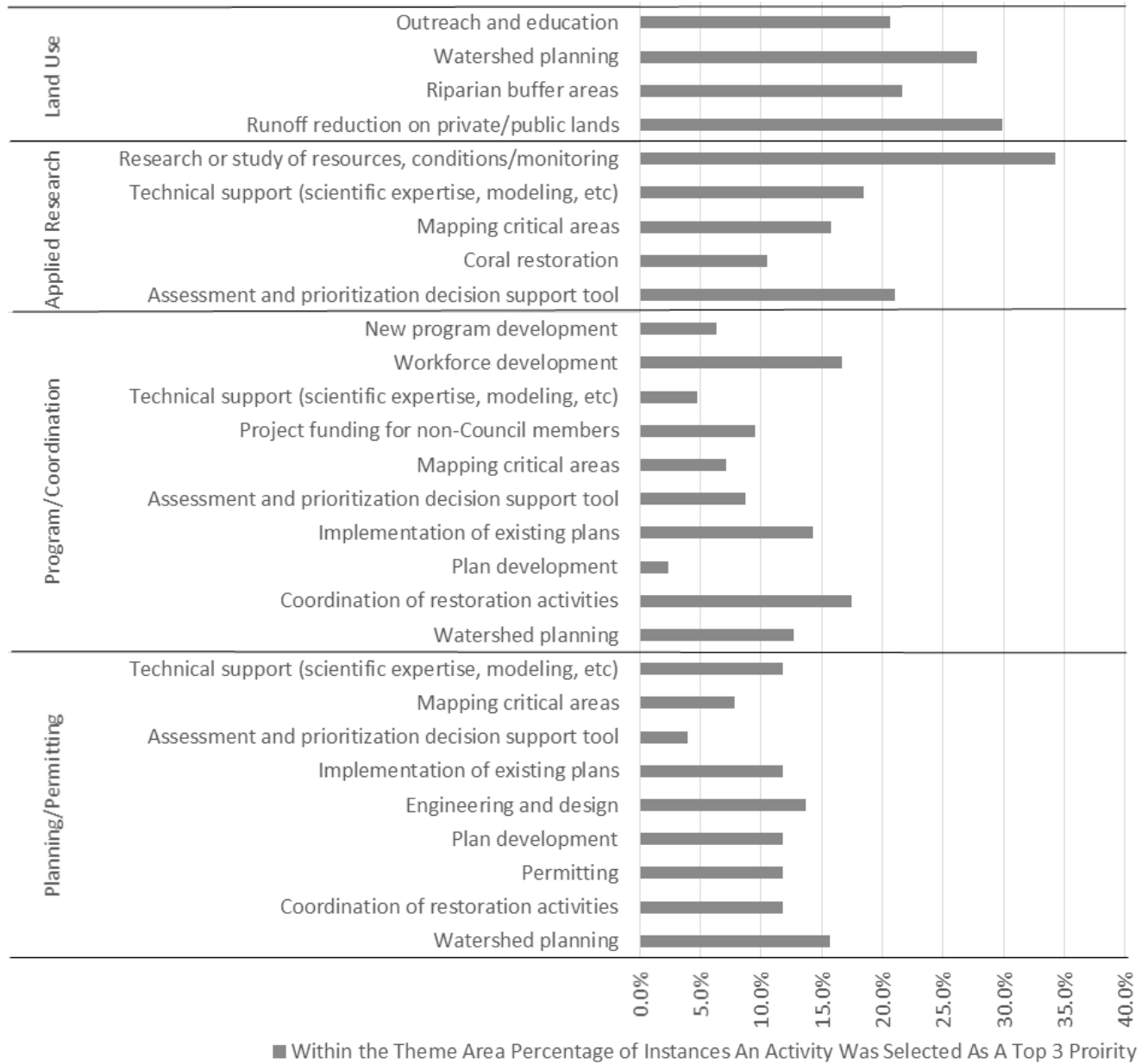
Further, responses supporting research and planning (across the three categories in which they are included) seem to indicate, again at least with this group of Gulf-wide respondents, an understanding of and support for identifying and funding projects that are foundational in nature and that will inform future restoration decision-making and implementation.

Not surprisingly, the relatively strong response to the “Program Coordination” theme indicates public expectation to see effective, cost-saving coordination between and among funded projects.

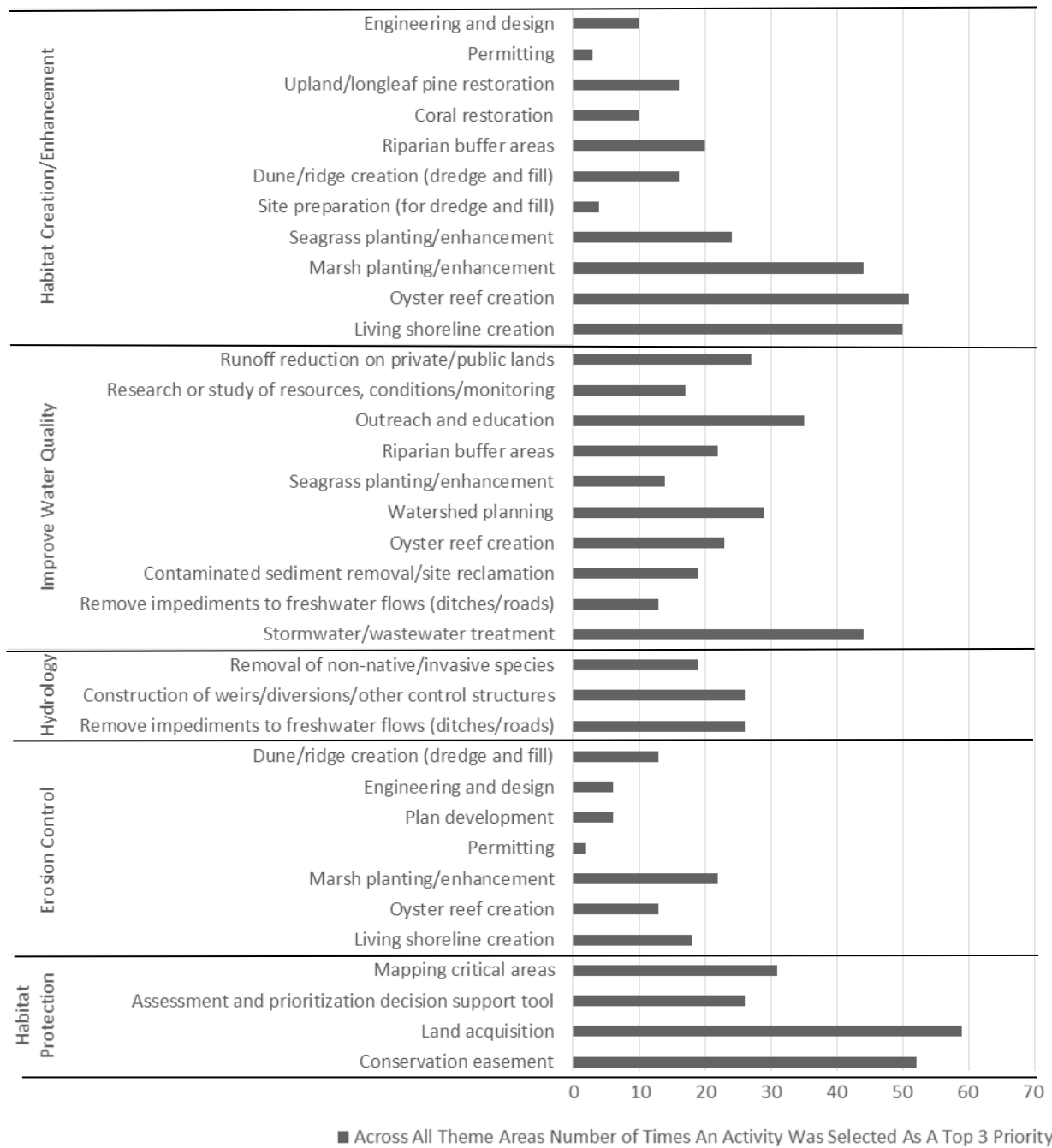
Within the Theme Area Percentage of Instances An Activity Was Selected As A Top 3 Priority



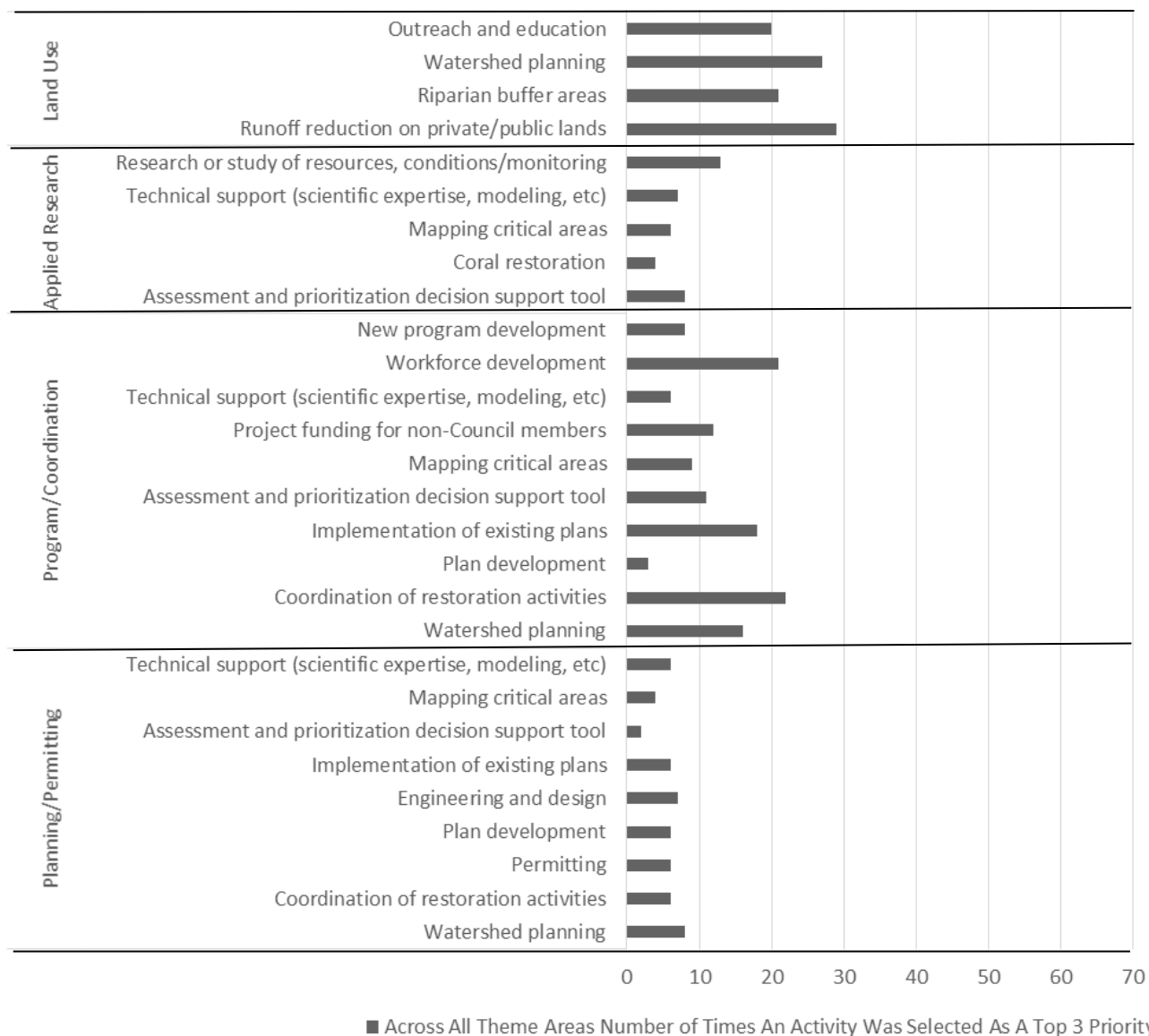
Within the Theme Area Percentage of Instances An Activity Was Selected As a Top 3 Priority (Continued)



Across All Theme Areas Number of Times An Activity Was Selected As A Top 3 Priority



Across All Theme Areas Number of Times An Activity Was Selected As a Top 3 Priority (Continued)



As was found with the overall theme results, responses prioritizing among specific restoration activities are wide and varied. Again, no one activity within any given theme received a majority (50%+) response. Further, given that some category/theme areas had fewer activities from which to prioritize (for example, the “changes to hydrology” theme only had three separate activities listed), relative differences between response rates are less meaningful. That fact notwithstanding, as with the responses to general restoration themes, the wide nature of responses would seem to support a broad, balanced, integrated approach to the Funded Priorities List. Interestingly, at this more granular activity level, respondents continued to support foundational activities beyond basic project implementation.

Watershed planning, education and outreach, decision support tools, and mapping critical areas all received relatively significant responses for prioritization.

IMPORTANT NOTE:

The exercise completed by respondents in this instance related to only those proposals currently before the RESTORE Council – and therefore did not represent the full range of restoration activities that could possibly be undertaken. It was pointed out by several participants across multiple meeting sites that any information gleaned from this exercise – particularly as it relates to priority setting – should only be used in this instance of FPL development and not future revisions to the Funded Priorities List. This is particularly important to remember in light of the limited amount of funds available for use in this instance of the FPL. The Council anticipates that once the full amount ultimately to be paid into the Trust Fund is known, future amendments to the FPL will include significantly larger projects and project lists that reflect both the full amount available to be spent for restoration activities and a more comprehensive range of activities. This fact will necessitate a revisit of priority-setting by stakeholders and decision-makers.

Implications and Next Steps

In July 2014, the RESTORE Council published a document titled “*Summary of Public Input*”³. In this document, the Council synopsised in broad measure the full range of public comment that had been collected across the Gulf of Mexico region beginning with the Mabus Report (2010)⁴, incorporating information from the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force Strategy (2011)⁵, as well as input received by the RESTORE Council as it prepared and published its initial Comprehensive Plan (2013). In this document the Council laid out how public opinion from these earlier efforts was used to influence on-going restoration planning and activities (see pages 7-11 of a *Summary of Public Input* for specifics). Information about this most recent round of listening sessions, collected for this EPA report, can be viewed as complimentary to these previous efforts – adding yet more context to the on-going public discussion around restoration.

In the near or immediate term restoration planners and decision-makers should consider reviewing more closely this information to inform work going forward. As restoration proposal ideas are developed further, whether by EPA or other RESTORE Council members, project and program planners may wish to use this data to inform planning efforts. As part of the longer term approach to on-going restoration, stakeholders should strive to understand how this information - and all public input collected previously – fits into the long term evolving story of how the broader Gulf-wide community thinks about approaches and priority-setting for restoration.

³ <https://www.restorethegulf.gov/sites/default/files/Summary%20of%20Public%20Input%20%282010-2013%29.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.restorethegulf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/gulf-recovery-sep-2010.pdf>

⁵ http://www.epa.gov/gulfcoasttaskforce/pdfs/GulfCoastReport_Full_12-04_508-1.pdf

The Need for On-Going Public Input

As technical restoration plans advance, conditions impacting project delivery often change. Lessons from implementation are learned, hopefully improving restoration activities and techniques. Just as staying up to date on technical approaches improves the likelihood of successful restoration, so too staying current with what the impacted citizenry desires and expects increases the chances for positive outcomes. Obviously not every funding decision will resonate or please all of us. Limited funds make pleasing everyone an impossibility. But citizens who see a nexus, even a general one, between their input and how program decision-making is made are more likely to stay involved. And involved citizens - who see and understand the connections between the broader community's self-interest and the restoration activities being undertaken - are more likely to support the sustainability of those efforts over time. No public engagement effort is ever complete. EPA, and all restoration stakeholders, should continue to actively dialog with our communities.

Appendix A
Priority-Setting Input Document



Meeting city/state: _____

Thank you for participating in the listening session. Below you will find all of the restoration activities in the 50 proposals under consideration. We have categorized them to help you identify priorities for your community.

1. Below are the basic categories of restoration activities proposed. Circle your top three (3) priorities:

- | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Habitat creation/enhancement | Improvements to water quality |
| Changes to hydrology | Erosion control |
| Habitat protection | Land use planning/implementation |
| Applied research | Program/coordination |
| Planning/permitting | |

Notes:

(over, please)

2. The basic categories of restoration include a number of proposed activities. In the categories you circled on the first page as “high priority,” circle your top three (3) restoration activities (in the right column).

Restoration Categories and Associated Activities	
Restoration Project Types	Restoration Activities
Habitat creation/enhancement	Living shoreline creation
	Oyster reef creation
	Marsh planting/enhancement
	Seagrass planting/enhancement
	Site preparation (for dredge and fill)
	Dune/ridge creation (dredge and fill)
	Riparian buffer areas
	Coral restoration
	Upland/longleaf pine restoration
	Permitting
Engineering and design	
Improvements to water quality	Stormwater/wastewater treatment
	Remove impediments to freshwater flows (ditches/roads)
	Contaminated sediment removal/site reclamation
	Oyster reef creation
	Watershed planning
	Seagrass planting/enhancement
	Riparian buffer areas
	Outreach and education
	Research or study of resources, conditions/monitoring
	Runoff reduction on private/public lands
Changes to hydrology	Remove impediments to freshwater flows (ditches/roads)
	Construction of weirs/diversions/other control structures
	Removal of non-native/invasive species
Erosion control	Living shoreline creation
	Oyster reef creation
	Marsh planting/enhancement
	Permitting
	Plan development
	Engineering and design
	Dune/ridge creation (dredge and fill)
Habitat protection	Conservation easement
	Land acquisition
	Assessment and prioritization decision support tool
	Mapping critical areas

Land use plan/implementation	Runoff reduction on private/public lands
	Riparian buffer areas
	Watershed planning
	Outreach and education
Applied research	Assessment and prioritization decision support tool
	Coral restoration
	Mapping critical areas
	Technical support (scientific expertise, modeling, etc)
	Research or study of resources, conditions/monitoring
Program/coordination	Watershed planning
	Coordination of restoration activities
	Plan development
	Implementation of existing plans
	Assessment and prioritization decision support tool
	Mapping critical areas
	Project funding for non-Council members
	Technical support (scientific expertise, modeling, etc)
	Workforce development
	New program development
Planning/permitting	Watershed planning
	Coordination of restoration activities
	Permitting
	Plan development
	Engineering and design
	Implementation of existing plans
	Assessment and prioritization decision support tool
	Mapping critical areas
	Technical support (scientific expertise, modeling, etc)

Notes:

Appendix B
Listening Sessions Results Data

Number of times a basic category of restoration was selected as a top 3 priority									
	Habitat Creation/ Enhancement	Changes to Hydrology	Habitat Protection	Applied Research	Planning/ Permitting	Improvements to Water Quality	Erosion Control	Land use Planning/ Implementation	Program/ Coordination
Total	88	33	58	15	17	87	30	37	44
Percent	21.5%	8.1%	14.2%	3.7%	4.2%	21.3%	7.3%	9.0%	10.8%

Number of times a basic category of restoration was selected as a top 3 priority									
	Habitat Creation/ Enhancement	Changes to Hydrology	Habitat Protection	Applied Research	Planning/ Permitting	Improvements to Water Quality	Erosion Control	Land use Planning/ Implementation	Program/ Coordination
<u>Meeting Site</u>									
Pensacola, FL	18	3	10	3	6	26	6	9	12
Spanish Fort, AL	11	4	9	4	1	12	3	7	4
Biloxi, MS	17	4	12	5	1	15	3	9	12
New Orleans, LA	14	14	3	1	5	10	12	3	10
Galveston, TX	28	8	24	2	4	24	6	9	6
Total	88	33	58	15	17	87	30	37	44
Percent	21.5%	8.1%	14.2%	3.7%	4.2%	21.3%	7.3%	9.0%	10.8%

		Listening Session Meeting Site								
Restoration Categories and Associated Activities		Pensacola, FL	Spanish Fort, AL	Biloxi, MS	New Orleans, LA	Galveston, TX	All Meeting Sites			
Restoration Project Type/Theme	Restoration Activities	Top 3 Priorities	Top 3 Priorities	Top 3 Priorities	Top 3 Priorities	Top 3 Priorities	Top 3 Priorities	% w/in Theme	% Overall	
Habitat creation/enhancement	Living shoreline creation	14	8	9	8	11	50	20.2%	4.5%	
	Oyster reef creation	11	1	11	9	19	51	20.6%	4.5%	
	Marsh planting/enhancement	5	8	9	10	12	44	17.7%	3.9%	
	Seagrass planting/enhancement	7	3	2	2	10	24	9.7%	2.1%	
	Site preparation (for dredge and fill)	2	2				4	1.6%	0.4%	
	Dune/ridge creation (dredge and fill)		2			7	7	16	6.5%	1.4%
	Riparian buffer areas	3	4	6	1	6	20	8.1%	1.8%	
	Coral restoration	4	2	2		2	10	4.0%	0.9%	
	Upland/longleaf pine restoration	3	2	8	1	2	16	6.5%	1.4%	
	Permitting	1				2	3	1.2%	0.3%	
Engineering and design	2	4	1	1	2	10	4.0%	0.9%		
Improvements to water quality	Stormwater/wastewater treatment	18	7	6	6	7	44	18.1%	3.9%	
	Remove impediments to freshwater flows (ditches/roads)	3	1	3		6	13	5.3%	1.2%	
	Contaminated sediment removal/site reclamation	7	1	5	2	4	19	7.8%	1.7%	
	Oyster reef creation	6	1	2	4	10	23	9.5%	2.0%	
	Watershed planning	7	5	7	2	8	29	11.9%	2.6%	
	Seagrass planting/enhancement	5	2	1	1	5	14	5.8%	1.2%	
	Riparian buffer areas	7	2	4	1	8	22	9.1%	2.0%	
	Outreach and education	9	6	7	4	9	35	14.4%	3.1%	
	Research or study of resources, conditions/monitoring	4	4	4	3	2	17	7.0%	1.5%	
	Runoff reduction on private/public lands	8	5	6	2	6	27	11.1%	2.4%	
Changes to hydrology	Remove impediments to freshwater flows (ditches/roads)	2	4	4	8	8	26	36.6%	2.3%	
	Construction of weirs/diversions/other control structures	2	4	1	12	7	26	36.6%	2.3%	
	Removal of non-native/invasive species	2	4	2	6	5	19	26.8%	1.7%	
Erosion control	Living shoreline creation	3	1	1	7	6	18	22.5%	1.6%	
	Oyster reef creation	1	1	1	7	3	13	16.3%	1.2%	
	Marsh planting/enhancement	3	2	2	11	4	22	27.5%	2.0%	
	Permitting	1	1				2	2.5%	0.2%	
	Plan development	3	3				6	7.5%	0.5%	
	Engineering and design	2	1		3		6	7.5%	0.5%	
	Dune/ridge creation (dredge and fill)	2			8	3	13	16.3%	1.2%	
Habitat protection	Conservation easement	9	9	11	3	20	52	31.0%	4.6%	
	Land acquisition	11	10	11	5	22	59	35.1%	5.3%	
	Assessment and prioritization decision support tool	4	4	4	3	11	26	15.5%	2.3%	
	Mapping critical areas	10	6	3	3	9	31	18.5%	2.8%	
Land use plan/implementation	Runoff reduction on private/public lands	9	7	7	2	4	29	29.9%	2.6%	
	Riparian buffer areas	7	5	5	1	3	21	21.6%	1.9%	
	Watershed planning	6	7	9	2	3	27	27.8%	2.4%	
	Outreach and education	6	2	6	1	5	20	20.6%	1.8%	
Applied research	Assessment and prioritization decision support tool	2	1	4	1		8	21.1%	0.7%	
	Coral restoration	2		1		1	4	10.5%	0.4%	
	Mapping critical areas	2	2			2	6	15.8%	0.5%	
	Technical support (scientific expertise, modeling, etc)		3	3		1	7	18.4%	0.6%	
	Research or study of resources, conditions/monitoring	2	3	5	1	2	13	34.2%	1.2%	
Program/coordination	Watershed planning	6	3	2	3	2	16	12.7%	1.4%	
	Coordination of restoration activities	7	2	5	4	4	22	17.5%	2.0%	
	Plan development	2	1				3	2.4%	0.3%	
	Implementation of existing plans	3	3	5	4	3	18	14.3%	1.6%	
	Assessment and prioritization decision support tool	5		2	3	1	11	8.7%	1.0%	
	Mapping critical areas	3	1	3	2		9	7.1%	0.8%	
	Project funding for non-Council members	5	1	5	1		12	9.5%	1.1%	
	Technical support (scientific expertise, modeling, etc)	2		1	3		6	4.8%	0.5%	
	Workforce development	2	1	10	3	5	21	16.7%	1.9%	
	New program development	1		2	3	2	8	6.3%	0.7%	
Planning/permitting	Watershed planning	2	1		4	1	8	15.7%	0.7%	
	Coordination of restoration activities	2		1	1	2	6	11.8%	0.5%	
	Permitting	1			3	2	6	11.8%	0.5%	
	Plan development	4		1		1	6	11.8%	0.5%	
	Engineering and design	2	1		2	2	7	13.7%	0.6%	
	Implementation of existing plans	1			3	2	6	11.8%	0.5%	
	Assessment and prioritization decision support tool	1			1		2	3.9%	0.2%	
	Mapping critical areas	2		1		1	4	7.8%	0.4%	
Technical support (scientific expertise, modeling, etc)	3	1		1	1	6	11.8%	0.5%		