AP - Obama-appointed task force completes Gulf report, USDA gives $50 million to river restoration

AP - White House releases report on Gulf restoration

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Pensacola News Journal - Obama's Gulf restoration plan to benefit Escambia watersheds

Obama-appointed task force completes Gulf report, USDA gives $50 million to river restoration

By Associated Press,
Published: December 5

HOUSTON — The U.S. Department of Agriculture on Monday pledged $50 million to a program designed to restore seven river basins from Florida to Texas in an attempt to show a blueprint for rebuilding the Gulf Coast's fragile ecosystem is more than just another federal report.

The USDA's announcement accompanied the presentation of the final report of the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force, a team established by President Barack Obama after the April 2010 oil spill that highlighted decades of environmental decline in the Gulf of Mexico.

(David J. Phillip, File / Associated Press) - FILE - In this June, 28, 2011 file photo birds are shown at a colonial waterbird nesting site along the Houston Ship Channel, in Baytown, Texas. The island is part of a project to restore lost wetlands and islands off the Texas coast. The U.S. Department of Agriculture on Monday pledged $50 million to a program designed to restore seven river basins from Florida to Texas, in an attempt to show a blueprint for rebuilding the Gulf Coast's fragile ecosystem is more than just another federal report.

The task force's plan for reviving the Gulf and the ecosystems and watersheds linked to it calls for rebuilding and conserving wetlands; cleaning polluted rivers and streams; strengthening communities along the storm-prone area and better preparing them for the storms that brew over the warm ocean waters; and allowing

more sediment to naturally flow downstream to slowly rebuild barrier islands meant to provide natural protection from storms.

“We are all dedicated to making sure that the treasures we grew up with are still around for future generations,” said U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa P. Jackson, a New Orleans native who chaired the task force.

Jackson and officials from other federal and state agencies made the announcements in Houston at a summit sponsored by the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies. The summit focuses on the Gulf, its importance to the U.S. economy and the need to reverse decades of damage and neglect.

Jackson said the USDA project — an offshoot of an existing national program aimed at conserving, improving and preserving the nation’s watersheds — is only the first of many initiatives she expects will be announced in the coming months.

“I expect a flurry of activity to get some meat on those bones,” she said.

The Gulf of Mexico, long neglected and under-funded, is a vital part of the nation’s economy. More than 90 percent of the nation’s offshore oil and natural gas production originates in the Gulf and 13 of the top 20 ports by tonnage are in the region. If the five coastal states were a country, it would rank seventh in global gross domestic product. In 2009, the Gulf Coast produced 30 percent of the nation’s gross domestic product.

While this committee has been assigned the task of identifying problems and pinpointing possible solutions, Congress has been considering a bill called the Restore Act that would allow most of the penalties BP would pay for fouling the waters to go back toward restoring the environment in the five Gulf states: Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Florida and Texas. The House is to hold hearings on the proposed bill later this week.

The first project administered by the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service gives farmers and ranchers the finances they need to change their land or water use practices to help clean, conserve and preserve the watersheds, said Harris Sherman, the USDA’s undersecretary for Natural Resources and Environment. The USDA provides them with a “tool kit” of options for joining the program, he added.

The program — called the Gulf of Mexico Initiative — also requires matching funds from state, local and nonprofit entities, and so the funds available could total some $90 million, Sherman said. Similar projects are already under way elsewhere, and have successfully reversed some damage done to waterways.

The $50 million commitment to the Gulf Coast, however, is unique because it significantly increases the department’s funding to the region. Already, Sherman said, officials have met with ranchers and farmers in the area and are confident they

will participate. The funding will be made available over the next three years, with the first $20 million available immediately.

The seven river basins identified for immediate assistance are already on the federal Clean Water Act's list of polluted waterways. In Alabama, the program's goal in the Weeks Bay watershed is to reduce agricultural-related nitrogen, phosphorous and sediment running downstream and to preserve wildlife habitats.

In a watershed shared by Alabama and Florida, the program aims to reduce the sediments and nutrients that flow into tributaries of the Escambia River. The USDA believes this will ultimately "improve wildlife habitat and the quality of water delivered to Pensacola Bay" and the Gulf. The project has similar goals for another Florida watershed.

In Louisiana, it will focus on the Baratoria-Terrebonne estuary and the Mermentau basin, once again by reducing the harm fertilizers have as they flow downstream from rivers and streams into the Gulf of Mexico. In Mississippi the Jourdan River basin is the focus, while in Texas the goal is to clean up the Guadalupe River basin.

Officials believe the project will improve water quality for thousands of residents in Pensacola, Fla., Mobile, Ala., and San Antonio.

"We're focusing on priority areas where we can get the greatest gains," Sherman said.

White House releases report on Gulf restoration
Associated Press
December 5, 2011
BY CAIN BURDEAU

NEW ORLEANS -- The Obama administration has released a report on how the Gulf Coast can be restored following the nation's worst offshore oil spill after the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig explosion off the coast of Louisiana in April 2010.
The report from the White House's Gulf of Mexico Ecosystem Restoration Task Force comes out the same week Congress considers a bill designed to handle billions of dollars in Clean Water Act fines BP is expected to pay for the release of more than 200 million gallons of oil into the Gulf.
The restoration plan is a recipe for fixing the Gulf Coast's myriad of environmental problems - from land loss in the Mississippi River delta to the area of low-oxygen called the dead zone that besets the northern Gulf waters every summer.

Task Force Says BP Oil Spill Fines Should Go to Gulf Restoration

New York Times
By LESLIE KAUFMAN
Published: December 5, 2011

A Gulf Coast task force appointed by President Obama recommended on Monday that a "significant portion" of the billions of dollars in fines that BP is expected to pay for last year's Deepwater Horizon oil spill go to ecological restoration.

Issuing its final recommendations, the federal-state task force said that a permanent panel should be created to champion and coordinate actions like limiting excess nutrients flowing into the Gulf of Mexico from farm states along the Mississippi. It recommended that river engineers put freshwater and sediment flows on an equal footing with issues like flood control.

The recommendations of the task force, which was created by Mr. Obama in the aftermath of the oil-well blowout in 2010, were similar to those in a draft report it issued in October and are not binding.

Under federal law, any civil penalties paid by BP under the Clean Water Act are to go to an oil spill liability trust fund with limited capacity to do restoration.

Legislation being considered in Congress would allocate at least 80 percent of the possible Clean Water penalties to gulf restoration but would define restoration efforts in the broadest terms. One version, to be reviewed Wednesday in a House committee meeting, calls for a new joint federal-state council for ecological restoration to direct or influence the flow of 60 percent of the money.

A full 35 percent would go directly to states to be used at their discretion, including for the purpose of economic restoration like rebuilding boardwalks or a convention center. Five percent would be available for research.

The explosion and blowout on a BP oil rig in April 20, 2010, killed 11 people and caused nearly five million barrels of crude to flow into the gulf, the largest oil spill in the nation's history.

Melanie Driscoll, director of bird conservation in the Gulf of Mexico for the National Audubon Society, emphasized that the ability to do large-scale ecosystem restoration would be "totally dependent on funding."

"This is a good first step," she said of the task force's recommendations. "But this is just a strategy document."

Along with the uncertainty surrounding Congressional action, the extent of the fines BP and other companies will pay is still not settled. Penalties could range as high as $5.4 billion or even $21 billion depending on whether they are found guilty of simple negligence or gross negligence.

The companies, meanwhile, are maneuvering to shift responsibility for the blowout and spill. On Monday, BP accused Halliburton, an oil drilling services contractor, of deliberately destroying evidence that showed that the cement Halliburton produced to secure the Macondo well was unstable.

In a filing in federal court in New Orleans, BP said that Halliburton had refused to turn over internal test results. It suggested that the company had also destroyed computer data "because it wanted to eliminate any risk that this evidence would be used against it at trial."

Halliburton said in a statement that it was reviewing the filing but did not believe that it had merit.

Clifford Krauss contributed reporting.

Feds give Gulf plan $50 million boost
HOUSTON CHRONICLE
Published 08:15 p.m., Monday, December 5, 2011
By MATTHEW TRESAUGUE,

The federal government on Monday committed $50 million to jump start a sweeping new road map for restoring the Gulf of Mexico after decades of environmental abuse.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture pledged the money to reduce runoff, improve water quality and increase wildlife habitat on agricultural lands in seven river basins that drain into the Gulf, including the San Antonio River in Texas.

"This initiative will be a powerful demonstration that the Gulf of Mexico strategy will not be another report on a shelf," said Harris Sherman, undersecretary for natural resources and environment at the Agriculture Department.

The announcement came on the same day a federal-state working group unveiled a Gulf-wide restoration strategy at the Harte Research Institute's Gulf of Mexico Summit in Houston. The plan calls for rebuilding the rapidly disappearing wetlands of the Mississippi River Delta, protecting marine habitat and repairing oyster and coral reefs, among other goals.

While the task force, which included officials from the five Gulf states, hailed the report as the first formal agreement on restoration priorities, it is unclear how the effort will be funded. The Agriculture Department's financing commitment represents a fraction of what the plan will cost.

Diverting funds

To pay for the work, the task force endorsed the use of a "significant portion" of the Clean Water Act fines from the Deepwater Horizon disaster, which dumped nearly 5 million barrels of oil into the Gulf last year.

A bipartisan group in Congress has filed bills that would set aside as much as 80 percent of the fines – estimated at between $5 billion and $20 billion. Current law requires the money to go to the federal treasury.

The House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee will hold a hearing on the proposed legislation Wednesday.

Lisa Jackson, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's administrator and chair of the task force, said she is confident the plan will be funded because it has President Obama's support.

"The restoration of the Gulf is a national problem, not a regional one," she said.

Laura Huffman, Texas state director of the Nature Conservancy, said a large portion of the fines should go to the Gulf because "if you break it, you should fix it." However, she said she does not expect the bills to pass Congress because the money must be replaced if moved from the federal treasury.

Without the money, the federal government and states will not be able to do large-scale restoration projects, Huffman said.

"If all we do is rebuild oyster reefs five to 10 acres at time, we won't be able to make a dent," she said. "Meaningful restoration has to be done at scale."

'Major investment'

The New Orleans-based Gulf Restoration Network criticized the task force's report for lacking details, but said the region needs "a major investment from the nation," primarily through the Clean Water Act fines.

The advocacy group also called on federal agencies and others to follow the Agriculture Department's lead by funding specific projects that advance the task force's goals.

The project, called the Gulf of Mexico initiative, provides financial aid to farmers and ranchers who alter their management practices to conserve water and protect habitat.

The campaign also is intended to reduce excess nutrients flowing down the rivers that create an annual dead zone along the coasts of Texas and Louisiana. The low-oxygen waters are harmful to marine life.

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Report urges Congress to funnel oil-spill penalty money to Gulf
The Hill
December 5, 2011
By Andrew Restuccia

A federal-state task force established by President Obama in the aftermath of last year's massive BP oil spill urged Congress Monday to require that billions of dollars in fines from the disaster be used to help restore the Gulf Coast.

The Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force, which released its final report Monday, said Congress should mandate that a "significant portion" of the penalties imposed on BP and the other companies deemed responsible for the spill be funneled to Gulf Coast states to help rebuild the region's delicate ecosystem.

Under current law, the money would go to the federal government.

The report comes as Gulf Coast lawmakers are working behind the scenes to secure a Senate vote on bipartisan legislation to steer 80 percent of the penalty money to the states.

"The co-sponsors are talking one-on-one with senators right now to build enough support to get a vote before Christmas, and we are getting very good support. Slow and steady," Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La), a lead sponsor of the bill, told The Hill last week.
The bill, which was approved by the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee in September, has won the support of a range of Gulf Coast lawmakers, including Sens. David Vitter (R-La.), Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.), Thad Cochran (R-Miss.) and Roger Wicker (R-Miss.). President Obama has also called on Congress to funnel money from the fines to the Gulf states.

BP and the other companies deemed responsible for the spill face billions of dollars in fines for their role in the oil spill. If BP is deemed negligent under the Clean Water Act by the courts, the company will have to pay $1,000 for every barrel of oil spilled into the Gulf. If the courts find that BP was grossly negligent, the company will have to pay $4,200 per barrel.

Last year's spill spewed about 4.9 million barrels of oil into the Gulf. That means BP could face fines ranging from $5.4 billion to $21.1 billion.

The task force report includes a number of other recommendations for restoring the Gulf centered around four broad goals: “restore and conserve habitat; restore water quality; replenish and protect living coastal and marine resources; enhance community resilience.”

The recommendations include conserving coastal marshes and beaches, reducing pollutants from storm water flows and restoring oyster habitats.

As part of the administration’s effort to help restore the Gulf, the Agriculture Department said Monday it would spend $50 million to improve water quality in Gulf coast river basins.

Obama established the task force, which is made up of officials from 11 federal agencies and the five Gulf Coast states, in October of 2010. The task force was charged with developing a plan “to restore and protect the local ecosystem for future generations.”

EPA announces federal task force plan to restore the Gulf of Mexico following the Deepwater Horizon disaster
Corpus Christi Caller Times
December 5, 2011
By Rick Spruill

Plan will be kickstarted by a $50 million infusion from the U.S. Department of Agriculture

HOUSTON — U.S. EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson on Monday announced a vast, collaborative plan developed by a federal task force to restore the Gulf of Mexico following the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

The plan will be kickstarted by a $50 million infusion from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to restore the seven U.S. waterway deltas crucial to the Gulf's health.

Jackson outlined in broad strokes the four-part plan that will take years — and hundreds of millions of federal and private dollars — to implement. It was developed by the Obama Administration's Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force made up of federal officials and leaders from five Gulf Coast states.

"This is the culmination of long hours and hard work and unprecedented collaboration and compromise born of an urgent need to address the challenges that have faced this region for years," Jackson said.

Monday's announcement kicks off a four-day meeting of some of the world's authorities on Gulf issues at the second annual State of the Gulf of Mexico Summit in Houston, hosted by the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.

Scientists, policy makers and environmental stewards will discuss the Gulf habitats most affected by the disaster and review scientific data gathered since the 2010 Deepwater Horizon explosion and oil spill that killed 11 people and spilled almost 5 million barrels of oil into the waters off the Louisiana coast.

The task force plan has four major goals, including restoring habitat and water quality, replenishing living resources and enhancing community resilience. It outlines several action plans under each goal.

Famed oceanographer and longtime Gulf conservationist Sylvia Earle said the investment in so much time and money is wasted if the end result does not lead to sound policies based on better science, not the current models.

Earle, chairwoman of the Harte Research Institute's advisory board, said creating zones of permanent fishing and drilling moratoriums would allow scientists an opportunity to gather baseline data for the benefit of future generations of policy and decision makers.

"I commend what the task force is doing, but there's a big gap from where the focus is to where it needs to be," she said. "We need permanent protections. We carve up the Gulf to exploit it, why not carve out areas dedicated to protection and recovery?"

The plan will be shepherded by federal administrators and representatives from the five Gulf Coast states, including EPA Region VI Administrator Al Armendariz.

"We will make sure all projects receive the proper scientific support and that we coordinate across all five states to make sure we have a clear strategy to solve the problems the task force identifies," Armendariz said.

The $50 million announced Monday will be matched by a combination of private, state and nonprofit funding, Department of Agriculture Undersecretary Harris Sherman said.

The plan represents a blueprint mapped by people and businesses along the Gulf Coast who depend on it for their livelihood, said Nancy Sutley, chairwoman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality.

"The president made it clear he wanted this policy to come from the Gulf, not from Washington," he said. "It's only a beginning but it is a platform."

She said President Barack Obama remains committed to the task force's work as critical to protecting the home of the nation's largest commercial fisheries and one of the world's largest oil fields.

"Pollution, over fishing, climate change — all threaten ocean health," she said. "Yet, we rely more and more on the ocean for energy, food and recreation. Healthy oceans matter."

She said the Deepwater Horizon spill was a wake-up call for officials following decades of decline in Gulf ecosystems.

The accident, one of the worst in history, ground to a halt Gulf oil production and cast an oily cloud over the future of Gulf energy development as government officials and environmental groups called for harsh penalties against BP, the company ultimately responsible for the spill.

The oil and gas industry is putting its heart, not just its vast resources, into Gulf restoration, said Paul Kelly, a former oil industry executive and adviser on energy and ocean polices for the Bush Administration in the early 1990s.

“It’s a heartfelt desire,” he said. “As an experienced observer, I see real sincerity from the companies.”

Kelly cited improved drilling techniques, anti-spill technologies and better safety measures for oil rig workers as an important part of the reason authorities have in recent months opened larger chunks of the Gulf to drilling permits.

Hand-in-hand with greater industry involvement in Gulf issues, Kelly said, comes a willingness from federal agencies to acknowledge industry’s role in the bigger picture.

“There may be some who are skeptics who think the EPA’s concern over the environment will overwhelm the industry,” he said. “But what I see from them is an attitude that recognizes how important the energy industry jobs are and how vital it is to our entire economy. Washington recognizes the importance and are accepting of it.”

Gulf of Mexico Facts

The world’s ninth-largest body of water.

Home to 15,400 documented marine species — 1,500 of which are unique to the Gulf.

Joins the U.S. with Mexico and Cuba and has shoreline in five U.S.and five Mexican states.

Gulf industries — oil and gas, tourism, fishing and shipping — combine for about $234 billion annually

Oil and Gas: $12 billion in wages, 100,000 jobs and feeds about half of the U.S. demand for oil.

Tourism: $9 billion in wages, 620,000 jobs.

Fishing: 1.3 billion pounds of seafood annually worth about $700 million.

Shipping: Seven of every 10 pieces of cargo that arrive in the U.S. from ocean transports arrive in one of the Gulf's six major ports.

Source: Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies

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Obama's Gulf restoration plan to benefit Escambia watersheds
Pensacola News Journal
11:00 PM, Dec. 5, 2011
Written by Jamie Page

At least 16 priority watersheds in seven major river basins in five states are targeted for participation in the new Gulf of Mexico Initiative.

Two of those watersheds include areas of Escambia County:

» Alabama/Florida: Canoe Creek Watershed and Sandy Hollow-Pine Barren Creek Watershed in the Escambia River Basin.

» Florida: Little Pine Barren Creek Watershed in the Escambia River Basin.

Pine Barren Creek, Canoe Creek and Little Pine Barren Creek are tributaries of the Escambia River.
The strategy
Among the key priorities of the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force's strategy, released Monday, are:

» Stopping the loss of critical wetlands, sand barriers and beaches.

» Reducing the flow of excess nutrients into the Gulf.

» Enhancing resilience among coastal communities.

The task force will open a local office, headed by Task Force Executive Director John Hankinson, in the Gulf Coast in mid-December.

To review the final strategy, visit: www.epa.gov/gulfcoasttaskforce.

More
Part of an up to $50 million Gulf Coast restoration initiative by the Obama administration is designed to improve water quality in the Escambia River and Pensacola Bay estuary.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack on Monday announced that the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service is launching a water and wildlife conservation effort along the Gulf Coast.

The initiative is in response to the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and President Obama's commitment when he visited Pensacola in June 2010 to help restore Gulf waters, shores and wildlife populations through the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force.

The task force released its final restoration strategy Monday, which lays out projects on which the $50 million will be spent.

The task force's plan calls for rebuilding and conserving wetlands, cleaning polluted rivers and streams, and allowing more sediment to naturally flow downstream to slowly rebuild barrier islands meant to provide natural protection from storms.

"We are all dedicated to making sure that the treasures we grew up with are still around for future generations," said U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa P. Jackson, a New Orleans native who chaired the task force.

Known as the Gulf of Mexico Initiative, or "GoMI," it represents a 1,100 percent increase in financial assistance for Gulf priority watersheds, two of which are in the Escambia region.

The new initiative will focus up to $50 million over three years in conservation assistance to farmers and ranchers in priority areas along seven major rivers that drain to the Gulf.

Federal officials say the idea is to prepare the Gulf region to transition from response to recovery and to address the decades-long decline that the Gulf's ecosystem has endured.

Local impact

The five states along the Gulf Coast — Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas — are part of the effort.

Pensacola was specifically named in a USDA statement as one of the cities that will benefit from the effort.

In a watershed shared by Alabama and Florida, the program aims to reduce the sediments and nutrients that flow into tributaries of the Escambia River. The USDA believes this will ultimately "improve wildlife habitat and the quality of water delivered to Pensacola Bay" and the Gulf.

"The Obama administration is committed to ensuring our coasts are healthy and resilient," Vilsack said. "Helping agricultural producers voluntarily improve the health of their land will sustain and enhance the production of food and fiber, while also improving water quality upon which communities depend. It also will benefit the estuaries, fisheries and wildlife so integral to jobs and the economy in the Gulf."

The money that will be spent in Escambia County will remain with the Department of Agriculture and will not be given directly to county governments. However, while the amount is unknown, a share of the money will be spent here, said Keith Wilkins, the county's Community and Environment director.

Escambia County government has three employees who work alongside federal employees in the Natural Resources Conservation Service office in Molino. They administer the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program, which provide erosion control and wildlife habitat restoration — things that also will be addressed by the federal funds.

"It's great that they realized that there are opportunities for these programs in agricultural areas, too, in the central and northern parts of the county," Wilkins said. "I am pleased to see that some folks there will not be forgotten."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.