

**RESTORE Act Bucket 2 Round 1 November 2014  
Council Member Proposal - State of Texas  
The Bahia Grande Coastal Corridor Project**

## Council Member Applicant and Proposal Information Summary Sheet

Commissioner Toby Baker Texas Commission on Environmental Quality <b>Council Member:</b> MC 100 P.O. Box 13087 Austin, TX 78711-3087	Point of Contact: Commissioner Toby Baker <hr/> Phone: 512/239-5515 <hr/> Email: toby.baker@tceq.texas.gov
<b>Project Identification</b>	
Project Title: Bahia Grande Coastal Corridor <span style="float: right;">Project</span>	
State(s): Texas	County/City/Region:
General Location: <i>Projects must be located within the Gulf Coast Region as defined in RESTORE Act. (attach map or photos, if applicable)</i> Located adjacent to the Laguna Madre and between Bahia Grande and the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge in South Texas	
<b>Project Description</b>	
<b>RESTORE Goals:</b> <i>Identify all RESTORE Act goals this project supports. Place a P for Primary Goal, and S for secondary goals.</i>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Restore and Conserve Habitat <input type="checkbox"/> Restore Water Quality <input type="checkbox"/> Restore and Revitalize the Gulf Economy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Replenish and Protect Living Coastal and Marine Resources <input type="checkbox"/> Enhance Community Resilience
<b>RESTORE Objectives:</b> <i>Identify all RESTORE Act objectives this project supports. Place a P for Primary Objective, and S for secondary objectives.</i>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Restore, Enhance, and Protect Habitats <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Restore, Improve, and Protect Water Resources <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Protect and Restore Living Coastal and Marine Resources <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Restore and Enhance Natural Processes and Shorelines	<input type="checkbox"/> Promote Community Resilience <input type="checkbox"/> Promote Natural Resource Stewardship and Environmental Education <input type="checkbox"/> Improve Science-Based Decision-Making Processes
<b>RESTORE Priorities:</b> <i>Identify all RESTORE Act priorities that this project supports.</i>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Priority 1: Projects that are projected to make the greatest contribution <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Priority 2: Large-scale projects and programs that are projected to substantially contribute to restoring <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Priority 3: Projects contained in existing Gulf Coast State comprehensive plans for the restoration .... <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Priority 4: Projects that restore long-term resiliency of the natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries ...	
<b>RESTORE Commitments:</b> <i>Identify all RESTORE Comprehensive Plan commitments that this project supports.</i>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Commitment to Science-based Decision Making <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Commitment to Regional Ecosystem-based Approach to Restoration <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Commitment to Engagement, Inclusion, and Transparency <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Commitment to Leverage Resources and Partnerships <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Commitment to Delivering Results and Measuring Impacts	
<b>RESTORE Proposal Type and Phases:</b> <i>Please identify which type and phase best suits this proposal.</i>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Project <input type="checkbox"/> Planning <input type="checkbox"/> Technical Assistance <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Implementation <input type="checkbox"/> Program	
<b>Project Cost and Duration</b>	
<b>Project Cost Estimate:</b> Total :	\$ 535-19 million
	<b>Project Timing Estimate:</b> Date Anticipated to Start:     06/01/2015 Time to Completion:             12 months Anticipated Project Lifespan:     >200 years

## **Executive Summary**

The Bahia Grande Coastal Corridor Project (BGCC) will help to complete a protected corridor linking the globally significant Laguna Madre region of the South Texas and Northern Mexico Gulf Coast. By acquiring approximately 6,000 acres of land using RESTORE Act funds, the project will add to a 105,000-acre corridor of conservation lands that includes the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), Boca Chica State Park and the Lower Rio Grande Valley NWR. This corridor also connects over 2 million acres of private ranchland located north of Laguna Atascosa NWR with the 1.3 million acre Rio Bravo Protected Area, managed by the Commission Nacional De Areas Naturales Protegidas (CONANP) in Mexico.

The Laguna Atascosa NWR currently manages approximately 95,000 acres in Cameron and Willacy counties. The fragmented nature of these refuge tracts is a concern for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and our many conservation partners, leading to development of a landscape-level strategic plan to emphasize corridor protection and restoration (USFWS, 1999).

In addition to linking areas of important wildlife habitat, acquiring more land within the BGCC will help to protect the towns of Port Isabel and Laguna Vista from dust and tropical weather-related flooding, and provide enhanced opportunities for hunting, fishing and wildlife observation. South Texas is a world-renowned birding destination and wildlife-oriented tourism brings millions of dollars to the local economy.

### **Project Narrative**

#### **Proposal Introduction and Background**

Texas is one of the most ecologically diverse states in the Union. According to NatureServe's 2002 *States of the Union: Ranking America's Biodiversity*, Texas is second only to California in biodiversity. Texas has the highest number of birds and reptiles of any state and the second highest number of plants and mammals. It has the third highest rate of endemism in the country (ibid).

The BGCC landscape is one of the most biologically diverse areas in Texas due to its proximity to Mexico and the large variety of natural habitats. The area contains large expanses of Gulf coastal prairie interspersed with brush-covered clay dunes (lomas), which attain heights of up to 30 feet, and coastal wetlands consisting of wind tidal flats, brackish and salt marshes, and shallow estuarine bays and seagrass beds. These habitats are vitally important for wintering waterfowl and shellfish and finfish nurseries, contributing to productive sport and commercial fisheries.

All the properties identified in this proposal are either on or adjacent to the Laguna Madre, which is one of seven hypersaline lagoons in the world. This biologically rich area is a world-class nursery for redfish, spotted seatrout and black drum and one of the most productive fisheries on the Gulf Coast, supporting a recreational and commercial fishing industry. Small Islands provide nesting habitat for thousands of birds such as gull-billed terns, reddish egrets, black skimmers and brown pelicans, and the Laguna Madre also hosts wintering waterfowl including 80% of the world population of redhead ducks. Salt prairie and scattered yucca support nesting northern aplomado falcons, and brush-covered lomas are vitally important to ocelot and, historically, jaguarundi. Federally endangered sea turtles forage in the Laguna Madre and nest nearby on Padre Island.

Beginning in the late 1800's, the Bahia Grande area was recognized by early ornithologists (e.g., J.C. Merrill and G.B. Sennett) and naturalists for its abundant bird life. On August 2, 1939, J. Clark Salyer II, Chief of the Division of Wildlife Refuges, sent a 16-page report to Dr. Ira Gabrielson (first director of USFWS), that identified Bahia Grande as a top priority for protection. In the late 1990's, The Conservation Fund led a challenging effort to acquire a portion of the Bahia Grande Complex and add it to the Laguna Atascosa NWR. Since then, the Bahia Grande Restoration Partnership, which includes over 65 partners, has worked to inundate the Bahia Grande wetlands to restore historic habitat and reduce the large dust storms which negatively impact nearby communities. Today, as a result of this work, the Bahia Grande again is flooded and serves as a hyper-saline wetland supporting shorebirds, wading birds, and one of the largest nesting colonies of gull-billed terns.

According to the 2005 Texas Wildlife Action Plan, "All factors considered, [South Texas] is among the most threatened of the 10 [Texas] ecoregions and the more threatened of the two high diversity ecoregions. The increased population growth and associated development along the coast have fragmented land, converted prairies, changed river flows, decreased water quality and increased sediment loads and pollutants within marsh and estuarine systems. Projections indicate continued high growth and increased fragmentation in most parts of this ecoregion." Threats to wildlife habitat in the BGCC include rapid population growth and urban development, land fragmentation driven by rising land prices, roads, industrial facilities, and proposed wind power development. In particular, wind turbine installation has the potential to reduce the area's importance for migratory birds and endangered species.

The extent of success for protected areas to fulfill their roles and affect long-term species protection is dependent upon conservation planning, location consideration, size and connectivity (Margule and Pressey 2000). Larger and connected conservation areas are more likely to mitigate threats to habitat and sustain the species they were intended to protect. With this in mind, the 2010 USFWS Comprehensive Conservation Plan

prioritized completion of the refuge corridor between the Bahia Grande and Laguna Atascosa to provide connectivity and safe corridors for a variety of wildlife, particularly ocelots. Protection of this corridor will contribute to reducing the need to federally list state-threatened species such as reddish egret, Botteri's sparrow, white-tailed hawk, white-faced ibis, Texas tortoise, indigo snake and Texas horned lizard.

The BGCC includes over 15,000 acres of unprotected habitat. TPWD, USFWS, The Nature Conservancy and The Conservation Fund have identified multiple parcels with willing sellers totaling over 10,000 acres as high priorities for acquisition. This proposal will target 6,100 acres for acquisition from willing sellers, either through fee simple purchase or conservation easements. This will accomplish the following objectives:

- Block up permanently protected area by connecting the main unit of Laguna Atascosa NWR with the Bahia Grande unit;;
- Create a functioning habitat corridor linking millions of acres of significant coastal habitat in South Texas and Mexico; and,
- Secure northern basins of Bahia Grande and key watershed areas so final restoration of the 27,000-acre wetlands can be completed.

Actions proposed to accomplish post-acquisition restoration include:

- Restore natural tidal hydrology by completing internal basin connections;
- Restore freshwater hydrology to the BGCC ecosystem and improve water quality of surrounding receiving waters by rerouting of ditches to insure water drains across the landscape through existing basins;
- Enhance native grasslands by controlling invasive brush; and,
- Control non-native invasive plants and animals.

Ensuring the long-term health and productivity of the BGCC requires a forward-looking land conservation strategy that builds upon the existing network of state, international federal, state and local conservation areas; expands the scale of conservation across administrative and political boundaries; supports management stewardship for the public or private entity best suited for meeting long-term conservation objectives. We feel this proposal goes a long way towards accomplishing these objectives.

### **Implementation Technology**

The primary implementation method for completing the proposed corridor will be through fee title and conservation easement acquisitions. Lands will only be acquired from willing sellers. In some cases purchase of a conservation easement can be an efficient form of conservation, but there appear to be more opportunities for fee title purchases than acquisition of easements in the BGCC. Purchased tracts will augment

approximately 105,000 acres which have been purchased and protected in the area by state, federal, international and private partners. The lands or conservation easements purchased under this proposal will be held by either by The Nature Conservancy or USFWS.

### **Monitoring and Adaptive Management of the Project:**

Adaptive management is a continuous iterative process of overlapping elements that occur both sequentially and simultaneously:

1. **Biological Planning** – Assembling the biological foundation for conserving trust species – including identification of priority species and a subset of focal species; designation of population objectives; and compilation of models that describe expected focal species-habitat relationships.
2. **Conservation Design** – Applying models to spatial data that culminates in the designation of priority management areas and coarse estimates of the amount of habitat that will be needed to attain a suite of population objectives.
3. **Conservation Delivery** – Implementing management actions with the goal of efficiently affecting populations.
4. **Assumption-driven Research** – Evaluating and refining biological planning assumptions.
5. **Outcome-based Monitoring** – Assessing the effects of management on habitats and individuals to make inferences at multiple scales that have a bearing on future management decisions.

The BGCC partners subscribe fully to the principals and practices of adaptive management. Once acquisition of lands is completed, Inventory and Monitoring (I&M) plans will be written and implemented so that restoration prescriptions can be monitored for effectiveness. The number of acres purchased through this project proposal will be important as a basis for supporting biological outcomes including:

- Nest production of colonial nesting waterbirds.
- Number of nesting pairs of northern aplomado falcons.
- Safe corridor for ocelots as documented by camera trapping.
- Fisheries independent catch rate for targeted species.
- Meeting target salinities within the Bahia Grande wetland system.

Once indicator species are selected and I&M plans written to incorporate those species, the STCC team will apply the 5 elements of adaptive management as described above.

## **Measures of Success/Risks and Uncertainties for the BGCC Project:**

The BGCC project is being proposed as an adaptation strategy to reduce long-term risks and uncertainties. Scenarios of land-use change, climate change, and sea-level rise are incorporated into the proposal to minimize the impacts of potentially foreseeable threats to the sustainability of the proposed land conservation investments.

Desired future conditions in the BGCC would include stable to increasing populations of coastal grassland birds, including the aplomado falcon; healthy lomas that provide for increasing populations of ocelots and maintained populations of brush dependent species; estuarine and fresh marsh environments that provide historic levels of nursery habitat for commercially and recreationally important fisheries species, as well as improved habitat for shorebirds, wading birds and waterfowl. These desired future conditions will help meet habitat and/or population objectives of species recovery plans, Gulf Coast Joint Venture plans, Rio Grande Joint Venture plans, the Texas State Wildlife Action Plan, and Laguna Atascosa NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan.

The conservation success of this project will ultimately be judged determined by the persistence of populations and ecosystem processes, as described by Salomon et al (2006).

### **Risks and uncertainties of the proposed activities**

There is an urgent need to acquire land or conservation easement from private owners to functionally connect existing protected areas in the BGCC landscape. If action is not taken soon, these lands may be purchased for development, wind farms or other uses.

Sea level rise will likely increase wetlands on this landscape. Most portions of the corridor are high enough in elevation to sustain a one-meter rise in sea level without significant habitat impact. Sea level rise will not likely result in significant losses to open water bay systems and will only slightly increase the size of inland wetland systems. One of the current goals for Bahia Grande is to increase salt water flows into this wetland system to reduce hypersaline conditions. This is a rare circumstance where sea level rise could ecologically benefit the system. This rise will however put local communities at greater risk to flooding.

### **Outreach and Education Opportunities**

A “reconnection to the natural world is fundamental to human health, well-being, spirit, and survival” (Louv 2011).

Laguna Atascosa NWR is currently visited each year by more than 150,000 people who come to learn about and enjoy the variety of natural resources that South Texas has to offer. Laguna Atascosa NWR staff provides environmental education programs for 1,600

school students, conducts numerous interpretation programs to approximately 9,000 participants, and attends various off-site, outreach events reaching close to 6,000 people each year. South Texas refuges and the BGCC are located primarily in Cameron County which is 88% Latino or Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau 2104), providing opportunities for outreach to one of the most rapidly growing and historically underserved demographic groups in Texas and the nation.

Over 1 million visitors travel to South Padre Island each year (AEC 2012) along State Highway 100 which bisects the northern portion of the Bahia Grande area. South Texas refuges are currently part of the new USFWS Urban Initiative, launched in 2014. As part of an Urban Refuge designation, the South Texas National Wildlife Refuge Complex could receive \$1 million annually in funding to support work with Spanish-speaking and urban communities in South Texas.

Completing the BGCC project will present opportunities to:

- Relocate current refuge visitor programs closer to State Highway 100 and Bahia Grande to be more visible and accessible to visitors traveling to South Padre Island.
- Partner with Laguna Vista and The Nature Conservancy to co-locate a joint visitor and education facility.
- Expand environmental education and community engagement to urban, Spanish speaking, and historically underserved populations.
- Promote land stewardship and protection of these valuable habitats through sharing of this great restoration story.
- Expand and increase opportunities for visitors to fish, hunt, observe wildlife and kayak.

### **Leveraging of Resources and Partnerships**

The BGCC has a history of demonstrated partnerships that have been highly effective. One such partnership has resulted in the partial restoration of the Bahia Grande wetland complex.

The Bahia Grande is a 10,000-acre tidal basin that once served as an important nursery for a wide variety of fish, shellfish, wildlife, and waterfowl in the South Texas coastal region. The construction of the Brownsville Ship Channel in the mid-1930's and the subsequent construction of State Highway 48 in the mid-1950's cut off tidal exchange into Bahia Grande, desiccating the basin and creating a dust bowl that was only filled with water by tropical storm events. For the past 70 years, local communities have

endured persistent dust storms, fish kills, and other environmental impacts surrounding this degraded wetland complex.

The purchase of the Bahia Grande by the USFWS and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA) in 1999 and 2000 enabled restoration of fisheries and wildlife habitat in the Bahia Grande wetland complex. The Bahia Grande is now managed as a unit of the Laguna Atascosa NWR. Starting in early 2001, citizen, conservation, and government groups met to devise strategies for restoring the Bahia Grande. Today, these groups form a diverse, community-based partnership that includes more than 65 governmental agencies, educational institutions, conservation organizations, commercial and recreational fishermen, private landowners, corporations and foundations. This collaboration has accomplished one of the largest coastal habitat restoration projects in the United States and has drawn national attention to the cooperative, community-based efforts of public and private partnerships in restoring our nation's coastal wetlands.

If the BGCC land acquisition program is funded as proposed, these partnerships created for the Bahia Grande restoration project will be highly effective in restoring purchased properties for the benefit of Deepwater Horizon oil spill affected species. It is the intent of the BGCC partners to seek additional funding to secure protection of additional private lands within the corridor leveraging RESTORE dollars with contributions from other non-profits, foundations, communities and private organizations.

The South Texas Refuge Complex has one of the largest staffs in the National Wildlife Refuge system and a large fire program. USFWS will utilize these resources in cooperation with other land managers through Memorandums of Understanding and Cooperative Agreements to provide stewardship to lands acquired under this proposal. Land management agencies will collaborate to apply a full range of tools to manage and restore these lands including:

- Hydrological restoration;
- Prescribed fire;
- Grassland restoration and mesquite control in grasslands;
- Re-vegetating woody corridors for endangered ocelots;
- Herbicide control of exotic grasses and invasive woody species; and,
- Protection of shorelines on the Laguna Madre.

## **Program Benefits – Biological**

Many researchers have identified increasing the size of conservation areas as a strategy for conserving biodiversity and a strategy to adapt to climate change (Heller and Zavaleta 2009, Lawler 2009, Mawdsley et. al 2009). This project will connect over 105,000 acres of protected lands allowing these habitats to adapt and be more resilient to changes in the climate.

Corridors between conservation lands to facilitate species range shifts are strategies to adapt to climate change (Heller and Zavaleta 2009, Mawdsley et. al. 2009). This project will connect Laguna Atascosa NWR, Lower Rio Grande Valley NWR and Boca Chica State Park and connect over 2 million acres of intact habitat on private rangeland with the 1.3 million acre Rio Bravo Protected Area, managed by the Commission Nacional De Areas Naturales Protegidas in Mexico. This connection could prevent future listing of state threatened species like reddish egret, Botteri's sparrow, white-tailed hawk, white-faced ibis, Texas tortoise, Texas indigo snake and Texas horned lizard.

Laguna Atascosa NWR has an impressive 415 species of birds that use it for migration, wintering, or breeding, more bird species than almost any other area of comparable size in the United States. Several tropical species reach their northernmost range in South Texas, which is also part of the convergence of the Central and Mississippi Flyways. The American Bird Conservancy has designated the area as a "globally important bird area" for its amazing variety of migratory, winter and resident birds and habitats. Millions of migratory shorebirds, raptors, songbirds and waterfowl touch down each year on their journeys between winter homes in Mexico, Central and South America and nesting habitats as far north as the tundra above the Arctic Circle. Many of these 400-plus bird species, including colonial nesters, shorebirds, and waterbirds, were dramatically affected by the Deepwater Horizon spill.

The recovery plan for ocelots identifies the connection of a bi-national corridor of habitat between the population of ocelots in Cameron County and the population in northern Tamaulipas as a goal for recovery (USFWS 2010). This project will fulfill that recovery action.

Securing additional portions of the Bahia Grande wetland system and portions of its watershed will secure valuable freshwater inflows and allow partners to complete hydrological restoration needed to increase tidal flows and divert fresh water inflows needed to fully restore this system. This will allow oyster beds and seagrasses to return to the system and bring back this once great fishery and the thousands of shorebirds, waterfowl and wading birds that used this system.

## **Program Benefits - Economic**

South Texas is a world-renowned birding destination, which brings millions of dollars to the South Texas tourism economy. The Bahia Grande landscape has amazing unobstructed views of coastal marsh, prairie and lomas. The large scale and accessibility of this landscape make it suitable for hunting, fishing, kayaking and nature observation.

The site has large huntable populations of feral hogs and nilgai antelope. There may also be opportunities to hunt bobwhite quail and white-winged doves. High public demand for these activities is expected.

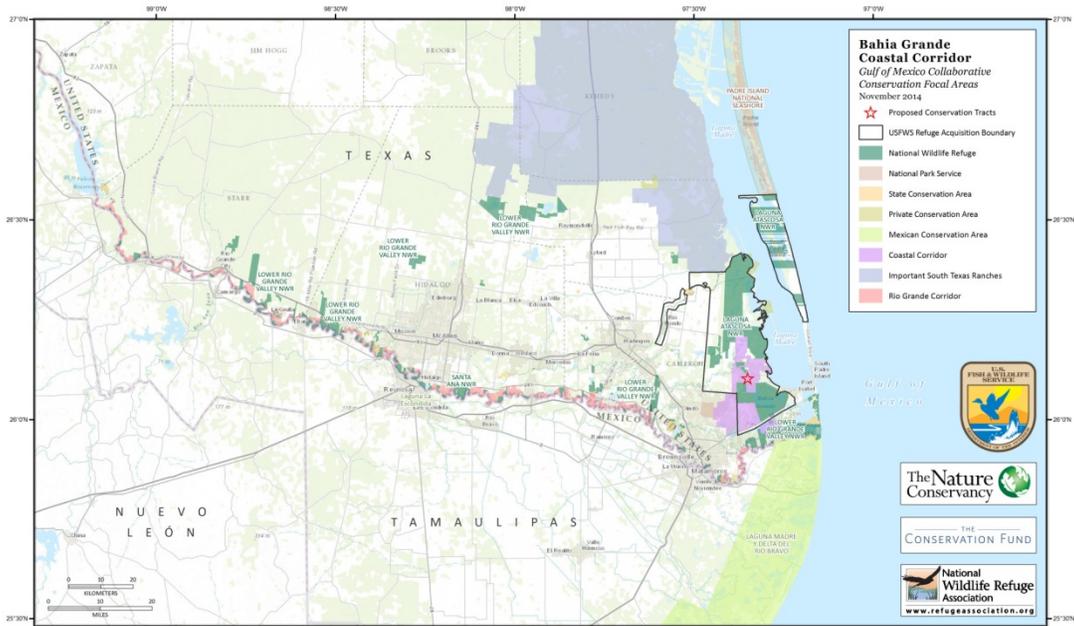
The Bahia Grande system is already seeing the return of game fish and is expected to be an outstanding fishery once fully restored. Opportunities for fishing from banks and kayaks on designated trails will be explored.

According to Woosnam et. al. (2011), “Direct economic contribution from [Rio Grande Valley] nature tourism led to a total county-level economic output of \$344.4 million and 4,407 full and part-time jobs annually. This total contribution includes a \$179.4 million contribution to gross regional product and a \$110.1 million contribution to labor income across the region. Local taxes generated from direct nature tourist expenditures for 2011 were \$2,595,600 for sales tax and \$7,262,700 for hotel tax.”

South Texas is one of the fastest growing areas of the country. The population in South Texas increased by 30 percent from 2001 to 2011, compared to a 20 percent increase for Texas and a 9 percent increase for the U.S. as a whole. Area employment increased by 36 percent from 2001 to 2011, while Texas experienced a 20 percent increase and the U.S. a 6 percent increase. Area per capita income increased by 15 percent over the 2001-2011 period, while Texas and the U.S. increased by 8 and 5 percent respectively. Nonresidents accounted for 62 percent of total expenditures. Expenditures on fishing activities accounted for 56 percent of all expenditures, with non-consumptive activities accounting for 42 percent (Carver and Caudill 2013). Adding to the conservation estate of the BGCC will enhance these economic benefits and mitigate their negative impact on wildlife. The BGCC corridor and future enhancement of the Bahia Grande system will provide ecosystem services to area communities by providing flood protection and dust abatement. The development of recreational activities like hunting, fishing, kayaking and nature observation will increase visitation to the area and provide additional revenues to the community.

# Location and Description

The BGCC is located in south Texas, just north of Brownsville, roughly between the cities of Port Isabel and Rio Hondo, Cameron County, Texas.





## Budget Narrative

This project is expected to cost approximately \$19 million. Funding can be phased. The minimum funding needed for the initial phase is \$5.5 million.

Multiple partners are working on this effort. Depending on the manner that the council distributes the funding, The National Wildlife Refuge Association, The Conservation Fund or The Nature Conservancy may broker and commit funds to protect identified lands.

Item	Cost Rate	Sub-Total	TOTALS
<b>Acquisition</b>			\$ 18,288,000
6,096 Acres	@ \$3,000/acre	\$18,288,000	\$ 18,288,000
<b>Ancillary Acquisition Costs</b>			\$687,760
Appraisals and surveys	\$22,000 X6	\$130,000	\$132,000
Closing Costs	\$25,000 X 6	\$150,000	\$150,000
Overhead Transaction costs	2% x 18,288,000	\$365,760	\$365,760
Other		\$40,000	\$40,000
<b>Restoration</b>			\$120,000
Revegetation Storage and Supplies		\$130,000	\$130,000
Herbicides		\$15,000	\$15,000
Utilities and water management		\$50,000	\$50,000

**TOTAL Project Funding is:**

**\$19,095,760**

**Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council  
Environmental Compliance Checklist**

Please check all federal and state environmental compliance and permit requirements as appropriate to the proposed project/program

<b><u>Environmental Compliance Type</u></b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Applied For</b>	<b>N/A</b>
<b>Federal</b>				
National Marine Sanctuaries Act (NMSA)				X
Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA)				X
Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act				X
Farmland Protection Policy Act (FPPA)				X
NEPA – Categorical Exclusion				X
NEPA – Environmental Assessment	X			
NEPA – Environmental Impact Statement				X
Clean Water Act – 404 – Individual Permit (USACOE)				X
Clean Water Act – 404 – General Permit(USACOE)				X
Clean Water Act – 404 – Letters of Permission(USACOE)				X
Clean Water Act – 401 – WQ certification				X
Clean Water Act – 402 – NPDES				X
Rivers and Harbors Act – Section 10 (USACOE)	X			
Endangered Species Act – Section 7 – Informal and Formal Consultation (NMFS, USFWS)				X
Endangered Species Act – Section 7 - Biological Assessment (BOEM,USACOE)				X
Endangered Species Act – Section 7 – Biological Opinion (NMFS, USFWS)				X
Endangered Species Act – Section 7 – Permit for Take (NMFS, USFWS)				X
Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) – Consultation (NMFS)				X
Marine Mammal Protection Act – Incidental Take Permit (106) (NMFS, USFWS)				X
Migratory Bird Treaty Act (USFWS)				X
Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act – Consultation and Planning (USFWS)				X
Marine Protection, Research and Sanctuaries Act – Section 103 permit (NMFS)				X
BOEM Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act – Section 8 OCS Lands Sand permit				X
NHPA Section 106 – Consultation and Planning ACHP, SHPO(s), and/or THPO(s)				X
NHPA Section 106 – Memorandum of Agreement/Programmatic Agreement				X
Tribal Consultation (Government to Government)				X
Coastal Barriers Resource Act – CBRS (Consultation)				X
<b>State</b>				
As Applicable per State				X

## **Data/Information Sharing Plan**

Data gathered as a result of these conservation actions will become part of the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service Refuge Inventory and Monitoring System. Surveys will undergo peer review to insure only acceptable data collection protocols are used and will complement on-going monitoring efforts in the region.

Aquatic surveys will include seagrass beds, oyster reefs, shrimp and game/non-game finfish (Martinez-Andrade, F. and M. Fisher. 2012). Finfish surveys include bag seine and gill net surveys. Decades of historical survey data from the TPWD Coastal Fisheries resource monitoring program from each of these bays and sub-bays will be supplemented by regular surveys following acquisition and conservation of adjacent land tracts. This “before and after” survey information can be compared to before and after survey data at locations where adjacent lands have been developed, helping to quantify the biological advantages of land conservation for aquatic systems. Although absolute conclusions may be elusive, areas where miles of shoreline have been conserved are expected to show demonstrable benefits to adjacent aquatic systems.

Data gathering will be used to inform active management such as herbicide treatment, fire, water management and periodic grazing. Information will guide resource decision making through an adaptive management process (Williams et. al. 2007). All information collected by the Service will be put into the Planning and Review of Inventory and Monitoring on Refuges (PRIMR) database. This is then uploaded into the Fish and Wildlife Service catalog (ServCat) system and made available to the public.

General information will be provided to the Deepwater Horizon Project Data Tracker directory which is accessible from the Gulf Restoration page of the Gulf of Mexico Alliance’s website [www.dwhprojecttracker.org](http://www.dwhprojecttracker.org).

## **References**

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## Knobloch Family Foundation

November 10, 2014

Mr. Ben Scaggs  
Deputy Director  
Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council

Re: Support for Texas' RESTORE Act land conservation proposals

Dear Mr. Scaggs:

The Knobloch Family Foundation of Houston is committed to encouraging and supporting the restoration and health of the Gulf Coast. In recent years we have worked closely with private, state, and federal conservation partners to accomplish strategic conservation goals in Texas and elsewhere. The Foundation has assisted financially with the acquisition of the Cade Ranch for addition to the Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge in southeast Texas, provided funding for the establishment of a Gulf-wide conservation project database, and established a \$500,000 grant program through the Galveston Bay Foundation that helps non-profit organizations cover closing costs for strategic acquisitions of land and conservation easements. This past summer, the Foundation contributed \$2 million toward the acquisition of the iconic 17,351-acre Powderhorn Ranch on Matagorda Bay in Calhoun County.

Our coastal partners have identified priority conservation focal areas in the Galveston Bay watershed, the Matagorda Bay Complex and in the Bahia Grande – Laguna Atascosa corridor in Cameron County. Each of these focal areas includes productive ecosystems with high biological values that contribute significantly to the overall health of the Texas Coast and the Gulf of Mexico. Some of these areas are at immediate risk of loss and others represent closing windows of opportunity for landscape-scale conservation. All currently have willing sellers. You will see these priorities reflected in the proposals submitted to you by the State of Texas. We encourage your consideration of these proposals.

Furthermore, the Knobloch Family Foundation is prepared to provide financial support in these focal areas to leverage awards made to Texas by the RESTORE Council for land conservation in Texas. The resources of the Foundation are such that we anticipate awarding several million dollars to ensure that our partners are positioned, with your assistance, to acquire the best and most strategic coastal lands for conservation. Please consider this letter a commitment to provide appropriate match funding that will make your awards to Texas for land conservation go further. Please feel free to contact our Executive Director Ernest Cook with any questions you may have. Ernest is at 617-697-7758.

Sincerely,



Carl W. Knobloch, Jr.

# THE CONSERVATION FUND

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*America's Partner in Conservation*

101 West 6th Street, Suite 601  
Austin, TX 78701  
(512) 477-1712 Fax: (512) 477-3316  
E-mail: TCFTexas@aol.com  
www.conservationfund.org

November 14, 2014

Commissioner Toby Baker  
Texas Commission on Environmental Quality  
MC 100, TCEQ  
PO Box 13087  
Austin, TX 78711-3087

Dear Commissioner Baker:

Through this letter, I am expressing The Conservation Fund's enthusiastic support for the Bahia Grande Coastal Corridor Project, which is being considered for funding by the RESTORE Council.

This project, in one of Texas' most threatened habitats, will create a protected corridor that links more than 3 million acres in the globally significant Laguna Madre region of the South Texas and Northern Mexico Gulf Coast. By acquiring approximately 6,000 acres of land using the proposed RESTORE funds, the project will complete a 105,000 acre corridor of conservation lands between the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), the Bahia Grande Unit, Boca Chica State Park and the Lower Rio Grande Valley NWR.

The Conservation Fund has actively worked in this south Texas habitat for decades. In the 1990's, TCF acquired 20,000 acres of the Bahia Grande, which is now part of Laguna Atascosa NWR. Just this month, TCF announced the protection of 7,428 acres of ranch land near Laguna Atascosa NWR in Willacy County. The land, protected through a conservation easement granted by the Frank Yturria family, provides vital habitat for two endangered species, the ocelot and the aplomado falcon.

Linkages provided by acquiring an additional 6,000 acres of habitat using RESTORE funds are critical to maintaining viable populations of the ocelot and aplomado falcon in the face of the tremendous development pressures ongoing in the Rio Grande Valley. The Conservation Fund is willing to assist in this process in any way we can. Thank you for your consideration of this significant proposal.

Best regards,



Andy Jones  
Director





Commissioner Toby Baker  
Texas Commission on Environmental Quality  
MC 100  
P.O. Box 13087  
Austin, TX 78711-3087

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## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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*The Friends is a  
non-profit organization  
whose mission it is  
to protect, support  
and enhance the  
Laguna Atascosa  
National Wildlife Refuge*

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Friends of  
Laguna Atascosa  
National Wildlife Refuge

22817 Ocelot Road  
Los Fresnos, TX 78566

November 13, 2014

Dear Commissioner Baker:

The Friends of Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge (Friends) wishes to emphatically endorse land acquisition in South Texas by backing the "Bahia Grande Coastal Corridor Project".

The Friends group has been a non-profit support group for the Refuge since 1997. The Friends has assisted the refuge with monitoring and conserving the ocelot population in South Texas, habitat improvement for Aplomado falcons, nature trail construction, and public outreach. For example, in 2013 the Friends had a specialty vehicle license plate approved by the State of Texas. The sale of each plate will provide 22 dollars to the Friends for ocelot conservation projects.

The Bahia Coastal Corridor Project will augment protection of a swath of native Gulf Coast ecosystems that are still relatively intact however under enormous threat from development. This ecosystem is an intermingled system of coastal prairie, thorn scrub, marine and fresh water wetlands that supports a host of fish, reptile, bird and mammalian species. All of the species and the mosaic of terrestrial and aquatic landscapes form a resource that has given this area an ecotourism revenue product that rivals any other industry currently in south Texas.

The Friends is united with our conservation partners in promoting landscape conservation surrounding the Refuge. We support the Coastal Corridor as means to helping protect the critical wildlife values of Laguna Atascosa NWR.

Sincerely,

Thomas W. deMaar, DVM  
President  
Friends of Laguna Atascosa NWR  
956-621-6066 (mobile)



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
South Texas Refuge Complex  
3325 Green Jay Road  
Alamo, Texas 78516  
Phone (956) 784-7500  
Fax (956) 787-8338



November 13, 2014

Commissioner Toby Baker  
Texas Commission on Environmental Quality  
MC 100, TCEQ  
P.O. Box 13087  
Austin, TX 78711-3087

Commissioner Baker,

The South Texas Refuge Complex which comprises the Laguna Atascosa, Santa Ana and the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuges (NWR) wholly supports the “Bahia Grande Coastal Corridor Project”. This project, submitted for RESTORE Act consideration, will provide tremendous support to a loose network of protected lands that link the globally significant Laguna Madre region of the South Texas and Northern Mexico Gulf Coast. This multinational, State and local partnership was formed to connect vitally important conservation areas in South Texas and Mexico and is essential to maintaining one of the most ecologically diverse habitats in the United States. The RESTORE Act funds would solidify the existing lands of the Laguna Atascosa NWR and partner lands to form a large corridor of preserved habitat for the benefit of many species!

The Coastal Corridor project is an essential step in maintaining key coastal habitats, and a viable population of ocelots on the United States landscape. In addition, this project will:

- 1) Provide a conservation buffer to the Laguna Madre, a unique hypersaline lagoon with a world-class recreational fishing industry.
- 2) Meet the objectives spelled out in the Laguna Atascosa NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP), which identifies the need for a “Coastal Corridor”.
- 3) Provide land managers and conservation partners an opportunity to recover the endangered ocelot and aplomado falcon in the United States.
- 4) Increase outdoor recreational opportunities for the public, which includes fishing and hunting.
- 5) The Corridor will meet objectives spelled out in the 1999 “Laguna Atascosa Proposed Refuge Expansion Plan” which approved the expanded acquisition boundary to include the area between Laguna Atascosa and Bahia Grande.

We appreciate the opportunity to work with the RESTORE Council and the State of Texas to further conservation efforts in this area. Conservation lands of South Texas provide support to many species of waterfowl and migratory species seen throughout North America. Additionally, rare and sensitive species such as the Ocelot and Aplomado Falcon continue to thrive on the Coastal Corridor which further demonstrates the success of this collective partnership.

Finally, on behalf of the South Texas Refuge Complex, the Service pledges to support restoration and habitat management on these properties including support for: restoration of hydrology, prescribed fire, control of invasive plants and animals, inventory and monitoring of wildlife.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert D. Jess". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent loop at the end.

Robert D. Jess  
Project Leader



# CITY OF PORT ISABEL

*"An Equal Opportunity Employer"*

305 East Maxan

Port Isabel, Texas 78578

(956) 943-2682

(956) 943-2029 Facsimile

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RESTORE Council

11 November, 2014

To Whom it May Concern:

As the Mayor of Port Isabel, Texas I would like to express the City's support for the Bahia Grande Coastal Corridor Project. This project will not only help preserve and protect habitat for the ocelot and aplomado falcon, it will also provide an opportunity to increase outdoor recreational opportunities, decrease the chance for flooding in our coastal communities, and preserve the Laguna Madre. The corridor creation is also an opportunity to increase ecotourism in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, something that supports local hotels and other businesses in and around Port Isabel.

I hope the RESTORE Council will give the proposal careful consideration, and make all attempts to fund this project for the amount requested.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Joe E. Vega".

Joe E. Vega, Mayor  
City of Port Isabel



National  
**Wildlife Refuge**  
Association

November 12, 2014

Gulf Ecosystem Restoration Council

Re: RESTORE Bucket 2 Round 1 (B2R1) Application for the Bahia Grande Coastal Corridor Project, Texas

Dear RESTORE Council members,

On behalf of the National Wildlife Refuge Association, I am pleased to offer this letter of support for the Bahia Grande Coastal Corridor Project submitted by the State of Texas. We recommend this project to the Council without reservation.

The Bahia Grande Coastal Corridor Project will link more than 3 million acres of important habitat in two countries for the benefit of Gulf Coast species directly affected by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, as well as other at-risk, threatened and endangered species. The State of Texas, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, national and local nonprofit organizations, and community partners have been working together in the Lower Rio Grande-Bahia Grande Coastal Corridor region for many years, with significant conservation successes to date. Now, there is an opportunity to acquire and conserve ~6,000 acres from willing sellers in the strategic corridor region between Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge and its Bahia Grande unit, simultaneously restoring the integrity of this unique ecosystem by connecting interior prairie and coastal habitats.

The Laguna Madre and Lower Rio Grande River Valley is a region of international biological importance. An investment of Gulf Ecosystem Restoration funding now would assure the natural health and vitality of this region for wildlife, ecotourism, and the natural resource-based economy for generations to come.

The National Wildlife Refuge Association is an independent nongovernment organization with specific purpose of advancing and amplifying the wildlife conservation mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its National Wildlife Refuge System. In a cooperative project with the Refuge System in 2012-2013, the Refuge Association performed an assessment of Gulf Coast refuges to identify the places where strategic investments in land conservation and restoration would have the greatest ecological benefits combined with community benefits and “bang for buck.” The South Texas Coast/Bahia Grande Coastal Corridor was identified as a high priority for investment due to the outstanding habitat resources for oil-affected and threatened species, the opportunities for linking lands already protected as national wildlife refuges, state wildlife parks and other conservation ownership, and the likelihood of strong community

support. It is for these reasons that the National Wildlife Refuge Association has also committed to providing significant future support for projects along the Texas Gulf Coast.

We are delighted to support the collaborative partnership between the State of Texas, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, private landowners and non-government organizations. Thank you very much for your consideration of this proposal and please feel free to contact us for additional perspective and information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Houghton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and a long, sweeping underline.

David Houghton  
President



David A. Garza  
Cameron County Commissioner  
Precinct 3

1390 W. Expressway 83  
San Benito, Texas 78586  
Email: [DAGarza@co.cameron.tx.us](mailto:DAGarza@co.cameron.tx.us)

PHONE: (956) 361-8209  
FAX: (956) 361-8211

RESTORE Council

11 November, 2014

To Whom It May Concern:

As the Cameron County Commissioner Pct #3, I would like to express my support for the Bahia Grande Coastal Corridor Project. This project will not only help preserve and protect habitat for the ocelot and aplomado falcon, it will also provide an opportunity to increase outdoor recreational opportunities, decrease the chance for flooding in our coastal communities, and preserve the Laguna Madre. The corridor creation is also an opportunity to increase ecotourism in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, something that supports local hotels and other businesses in and around Cameron County.

I hope the RESTORE Council will give this proposal careful consideration, and make all attempts to fund this project for the amount requested.

Sincerely,

David A. Garza  
Cameron County Commissioner Pct #3



# ELIGIBILITY REVIEW

Bucket 2 – Council Selected Restoration Component

**PROPOSAL TITLE**

Bahia Grande Coastal Corridor

**PROPOSAL NUMBER**

TX-1

**LOCATION**

Adjacent to the Laguna Madre and between Bahia Grande and the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife refuge in South Texas

**SPONSOR(S)**

Texas

**TYPE OF FUNDING REQUESTED (Planning, Technical Assistance, Implementation)**

Implementation

**REVIEWED BY:**

Bethany Carl Kraft/ Ben Scaggs

**DATE:**

11-18-14

**1. Does the project aim to restore and/or protect natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitat, beaches, coastal wetlands and economy of the Gulf Coast Region?**

YES     NO

Notes:

This project seeks to acquire approximately 6,000 acres of land in the Bahia Grande Coastal Corridor.

**2. Is the proposal a project?**

YES     NO

**If yes, is the proposed activity a discrete project or group of projects where the full scope of the restoration or protection activity has been defined?**

YES     NO

Notes:

**3. Is the proposal a program?**

YES  NO

**If yes, does the proposed activity establish a program where the program manager will solicit, evaluate, select, and carry out discrete projects that best meet the program's restoration objectives and evaluation criteria?**

YES  NO

Notes:

**4. Is the project within the Gulf Coast Region of the respective Gulf States?**

YES  NO

**If no, do project benefits accrue in the Gulf Coast Region?**

YES  NO

Notes:



**Eligibility Determination**

ELIGIBLE

**Additional Information**

[Empty box for additional information]

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**Proposal Submission Requirements**

**1. Is the project submission overall layout complete? *Check if included and formatted correctly.***

- |                                |                                     |                                       |                                     |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| A. Summary sheet               | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | F. Environmental compliance checklist | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| B. Executive summary           | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | G. Data/Information sharing plan      | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| C. Proposal narrative          | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | H. Reference list                     | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| D. Location information        | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | I. Other                              | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| E. High level budget narrative | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |                                       |                                     |

If any items are NOT included - please list and provide details

[Empty box for listing missing items and details]

2. Are all proposal components presented within the specified page limits (if applicable)?

YES     NO

Notes: