

**RESTORE Council Draft Funded Priorities List 3b**  
**Responses to Comments**  
**April 2021**

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## Introduction

From November 16, 2020 to January 5, 2021, the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (Council) sought public comment on proposed funding decisions for 20 projects and programs, collectively referred to as “activities,” to address ecosystem needs across the Gulf. The proposed funding for these activities is administered by the Council pursuant to the [Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities, and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States Act of 2012](#) (RESTORE Act) (33 USC §1321(t) and *note*). The proposed funding is from the RESTORE Act allocation known as the Council-Selected Restoration Component, or “Bucket 2.” The Council approves projects and programs for Bucket 2 funding in “Funded Priorities Lists” (FPLs).

Thus far, the Council has approved three other FPLs. For the third FPL, the Council determined that a phased approach to FPL development would enable the Council to respond to ecosystem needs and take advantage of important partnership opportunities to advance large-scale ecosystem restoration in the near term. In the first phase, the Council voted to approve [FPL 3a](#) in February 2020, which included one ecosystem project in Louisiana and one in Alabama. The Council has included 20 ecosystem activities in the second phase, referred to as [FPL 3b](#).

During the public comment period, the Council provided an overview of draft FPL 3b via two live public webinars on November 16, 2020. In order to give the public additional opportunities to learn about the proposed activities in specific geographic areas, the Council co-hosted the following virtual public meetings with each of the Gulf Coast states during the public comment period:

- November 30, 2020 - Mississippi
- December 1, 2020 - Florida
- December 3, 2020 - Texas
- December 7, 2020 - Louisiana
- December 8, 2020 - Alabama

The Council solicited verbal public comments during these virtual meetings, and also accepted written comments via email and through the Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) website. The Council has reviewed all comments received before the deadline.

The Council received a total of 142 unique comments from 1,946 private citizens, businesses, governmental entities (such as state, parish/county, and local governments), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other Gulf stakeholders. The total number of comments included 1,897 form letters. The total number of unique comments also includes those collected from 20 stakeholders who provided comments during the public webinars. The number of stakeholders engaged during the public comment period demonstrates continued awareness of Gulf restoration and interest in the actions and decisions being made by the Council, almost eleven years after the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill. The ongoing involvement of stakeholders who live, work, and play in the Gulf region is critical to ensuring that oil spill penalty funds are used effectively. The Council appreciates those who participated in the public review and comment process, as well as those who have supported Gulf restoration activities for many years.

Following review and consideration of the public comments received, the Council has decided to proceed to vote to approve FPL 3b. The final version of FPL 3b containing all comments and responses to comments will be posted to the Council's website. This will be subject to a Council vote on whether to approve. The public will be notified of both the Council vote and the availability of the final version of FPL 3b via emailed updates. If you are interested in receiving email updates from the Council, please visit the RESTORE website ([www.restorethegulf.gov](http://www.restorethegulf.gov)). Once there, you may subscribe to receive RESTORE Eblasts that are sent out periodically to update stakeholders on new and upcoming activities by the Council.

## Comment Analysis Process

The Council has completed an important step in finalizing FPL 3b by analyzing and responding to all verbal and written comments received during the public comment period. The Council used the U.S. Department of the Interior's Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) database system to manage and respond to public comments. In order to respond to the observations and recommendations provided by Gulf stakeholders, the Council grouped comments and responses by theme. Within those themed groupings, individual comments were combined when the topic or recommendation was related. In other cases, the Council responded to individual comments as warranted by the nature of the comment. Comments received that were not directly related to FPL 3b have been noted and will be considered during future Council deliberations, as appropriate.

## Changes to FPL 3b

FPLs include activities in two categories. Category 1 activities are approved for Council funding. To be approved in Category 1, an activity must have documentation demonstrating that all applicable environmental laws have been addressed. Category 2 activities are Council priorities for potential future funding, but are not approved for funding. These are activities that are not yet in a position to be approved by the Council, but which the Council considers to warrant potential future funding.

In draft FPL 3b, the Council indicated that its members would continue to collaborate in an effort to complete the environmental compliance documentation required to move some of the implementation components listed in draft FPL 3b as Category 2 into Category 1 status, prior to a Council vote on the final FPL 3b. In such cases, the final FPL 3b would include a link to the environmental compliance documentation on the Council's website for all approved activities.

Through this collaborative process, the Council has moved the implementation components of two FPL 3b programs into FPL Category 1. These two programs are the *Florida Strategic Gulf Coast Land Acquisition Program* and the *Texas Land Acquisition Program for Coastal Conservation*. FPL 3b has been updated to show that the implementation funding for these two programs is now in FPL Category 1, and includes a link to the environmental compliance documentation that supports the approval of implementation funding for these programs.

## Overarching Comments on Draft FPL 3b

### General Comments on FPL 3b

**Comment:** The Council received many comments expressing general support for [FPL 3b](#). Support was expressed for advancements the Council made in its process for developing FPLs and the clarity with which the Council described how its various decision and guidance documents relate to one another and informed FPL 3b decisions. In addition, there was support for the summary explanations of each of the proposed activities, including the associated diagrams and the specific activities selected for funding. Many commenters also expressed support for the selection of activities that may provide large-scale ecosystem benefits to habitat, birds, wildlife, coastal resilience, and water quality.

**Response:** The Council appreciates the generally positive reception to FPL 3b and encourages stakeholders to remain actively engaged in Council matters, including the implementation of FPL 3b.

**Comment:** One commenter asked why more funding is being approved in FPL 3b than in [FPL 3a](#), and whether different projects were considered in these two phases.

**Response:** The Council was initially planning on developing FPL 3 as a single action, consisting of a list of restoration activities addressing ecosystem needs across the Gulf coast. During the FPL development process, the Council identified a near-term opportunity to respond to ecosystem needs and save money while advancing two restoration projects, one in Louisiana and the other in Alabama. The Council determined that separating the FPL into two phases would facilitate taking advantage of this near-term restoration opportunity. Accordingly, the amount of funding in the first phase, FPL 3a, is based on the estimated cost of the two projects contained therein. The second phase, FPL 3b, is designed to address additional ecosystem needs across the Gulf. For this reason, FPL 3b addresses a broader geographic area, includes more activities, and provides more funding than FPL 3a. Due to the unique circumstance and timing of FPL 3a, the Council only considered the two projects referenced above. The FPL 3b process included a broader array of proposals from both federal and state Council members.

### FPL 3b Decision Process

**Comment:** One commenter stated that it is unclear how public engagement was incorporated into developing the proposals for consideration in [FPL 3b](#), noting that some proposals described public and stakeholder meetings that were held in the development of proposals while others did not specifically articulate their outreach activities.

**Response:** The Council recognizes the value of process transparency and encouraged stakeholder feedback throughout the FPL development process, including the

development of proposals. The method by which individual Council members engage the public in coastal restoration varies from member to member, and this variability is reflected in how stakeholders were engaged in the development of members' proposals. In some states, recommendations for specific projects were sought through a public portal that is monitored by the individual member. In some instances, projects may have been developed as free-standing proposals. In other instances, conceptual aspects of projects were incorporated into proposals seeking to address the same goals and objectives. In other areas, project or program concepts were vetted and evaluated through a comprehensive planning process. As appropriate, the Council encourages stakeholders desiring to advance specific activities to engage with the state or federal member(s) that may consider such a project within their state boundary and/or agency's mission as programs described in FPL 3b are implemented.

**Comment:** The Council received comments in support of updates made to the FPL development process, particularly with respect to its revised [FPL 3 Proposal Submission Guidelines and Review Process](#), revised external and internal best available science (BAS) review process, and transparency in posting proposal "packages" that contained the external and internal BAS reviews along with original and revised proposals. Some commenters noted the benefits of linking specific proposals to known ecosystem stressors, and using metrics to measure progress toward addressing those stressors. Commenters also noted the benefits of enhanced collaboration among Council members in the proposal development and review process.

**Response:** In updating the FPL development process, the Council considered public input it received on the [2015 Initial Funded Priorities List](#) (2015 Initial FPL) and the [2016 Comprehensive Plan Update: Restoring the Gulf Coast's Ecosystem & Economy](#) (2016 Comprehensive Plan Update). This public input helped shape the FPL selection process updates, including revisions to the submission guidelines and the BAS review process that allowed for clearer demonstration and review of the benefits of proposed FPL 3b activities. The Council thanks those who offered this input and encourages the public to remain actively engaged in Council matters, including the implementation of FPL 3b.

**Comment:** One commenter noted that the FPL did not provide much insight into how final decisions were made, and asked for more information on why some proposals were not included in draft FPL 3b and why other proposals were significantly scaled down in the internal Council review process.

**Response:** During the final stage of Council development of draft FPL 3b, the combined cost of the proposals under consideration exceeded the amount of Bucket 2 funds projected to be available in the Gulf Coast Restoration Trust Fund (Trust Fund) when the Council votes on FPL 3b. At that point in the process, all proposals were eligible candidates for Bucket 2 funding because they all met at least one of the [RESTORE Act](#) priority criteria and would advance at least one of the Comprehensive Plan goals and objectives. The Council had to eliminate and downsize proposals to meet the available

funding level. The final selection of activities to include in draft FPL 3b was supported by the Council's collaborative process, and received concurrence from all members to be released for public comment. This process was based on consideration of the ecosystem needs and priorities in each respective state, BAS and other proposal reviews, and by the voting structure of the RESTORE Act. As noted in FPL 3b, the RESTORE Act requires the affirmative vote of three of the five state members and the Council Chair to approve an FPL. In recognition of the voting structure and consistent with its commitment to collaboration, the Council developed an FPL 3b that is supported by all members.

**Comment:** One commenter asked whether all of the projects in FPL 3b were included in the proposals submitted by members in 2020.

**Response:** All activities, including both projects and programs, in FPL 3b were included in proposals submitted by the members earlier in the FPL development process. However, not all proposals were included in FPL 3b, and some were modified in scope and/or scale from the original proposal during this process. If you are interested in more information, you may view the [full list of FPL 3b proposals](#), as compared against the [list of activities included in FPL 3b](#), both of which are available on the Council's website ([www.restorethegulf.gov](http://www.restorethegulf.gov))

**Comment:** One commenter noted that this revised proposal development and revised BAS review process resulted in proposals that were much clearer than those submitted for funding consideration in FPL 1 in, "...articulating the expected scope and scale of project benefits, extent of alignment with the Priority Criteria, collaboration, partnerships, and leveraging, monitoring and adaptive management plans, and many other important details." Commenters also noted it was helpful that responses of the proposal writers to issues raised during the BAS review process were made publicly available. Another commenter felt that at least half of the proposals are seriously flawed. Further details regarding this commenter's concerns are addressed in sections of this document discussing comments received on specific proposed activities.

**Response:** As part of its revisions to the FPL process, the Council expanded its BAS review and proposals revision process. For BAS review, three anonymous reviewers from outside of the Council with technical expertise relevant to each proposal were identified by the Gulf of Mexico Alliance, an organization that the Council contracted with to facilitate the external review process. Council members neither selected nor knew who the external reviewers were. Once external reviews were completed, each member had an opportunity to respond to reviews of their proposal(s) and revise the proposal(s), as appropriate, in response to the reviews. Technical experts from each of the Council agencies were then convened for an internal BAS review panel to discuss individual members' responses to the external BAS comments and offer additional recommendations on how to respond. In some cases, those discussions resulted in additional revisions to the proposals. While it is always possible to further improve the

technical strength of its work, the Council agrees with the commenters who felt that the changes to the BAS review process improved the quality of proposals submitted for FPL 3b funding consideration.

### **Project Selection Process within Approved FPL 3b Programs**

**Comment:** The Council received a number of comments generally supporting the design of the programs within [FPL 3b](#), particularly with respect to the way in which projects will be selected within these programs. One commenter noted that the planning proposed for most of the FPL 3b projects can build on the planning already accomplished by state agencies and is necessary to create the programmatic framework for selection of the best on-the-ground projects for implementation funding. This commenter also believes that the proposed planning seems appropriately designed to ensure selection of sound projects and to complete the necessary environmental review of those projects. Another noted that state agencies have generally proposed appropriate criteria for the selection of projects to accomplish the programmatic objectives outlined in their project descriptions.

**Response:** The Council appreciates these comments in support of the FPL 3b programs.

**Comment:** The Council also received comments raising the concern that not all program proposals did an equivalent job in articulating a scientifically sound and transparent process to select component projects. These commenters urged the Council to carefully evaluate each program to ensure that it fully outlines a project-selection process that is based on sound science and is inclusive and transparent to the public. Specifically, these commenters recommended that an FPL 3b program should:

1. Address problems or stressors affecting one or multiple watersheds in the Gulf with restoration approaches or techniques defined as clearly as possible at the outset;
2. Be based on an assessment of restoration needs that demonstrates how actions at multiple sites will work to address identified stressors and improve the health of the Gulf or significant watersheds within the Gulf;
3. Include science-based, measurable objectives that the program expects to achieve;
4. Articulate a scientifically sound and transparent process to select specific component projects; and
5. Require a rigorous monitoring and adaptive management plan by which the program will be evaluated and monitored, including standardized data collection and performance metrics.

**Response:** The Council appreciates these commenters for the detailed recommendations regarding project selection within the FPL 3b programs. The Council concurs with the value of addressing stressors affecting one or more watersheds with defined restoration approaches and techniques. The Council's [2019 Planning](#)

[Framework](#) is intended to bridge the gap between the Council's broad Comprehensive Plan goals and objectives and specific projects by identifying restoration approaches and techniques that are critical for addressing ecosystem stressors in specific geographic locations. The FPL 3b programs are consistent with the 2019 Planning Framework in this respect and are intended to address targeted ecosystem stressors across broad geographic areas. Further, each proposal included the approach/techniques that the activity would use to achieve the selected Comprehensive Plan goals and objectives.

The broad use of programs in FPL 3b differs from the approach taken in [FPL 3a](#) and the [2015 Initial FPL](#), which focused more on individual projects. The use of a programmatic approach is intended to help address regional ecosystem challenges at scale. These programs will be implemented in different Gulf states, across large geographic areas, and will be tailored to circumstances and conditions associated with the ecosystem challenge at issue. For these reasons, administration of the programs will vary by location. However, the programs will be consistent with the Council's commitments, including those pertaining to BAS and public engagement.

The Council will implement mechanisms and processes to ensure the above-mentioned commitments are met. The sponsor of each program has described the decision process for selecting projects within the activity descriptions of each program. These [activity descriptions](#) may be found on the Council's website. Within this decision process, the sponsor indicates how BAS is incorporated and how the public will be engaged in the selection of projects. Once projects are selected, sponsors will initiate planning activities to complete any necessary engineering and design and to comply with all applicable environmental laws. Prior to initiating planning for a specific project or projects within a program, the sponsor will provide the Council with a workplan describing the proposed project(s). Each workplan submitted for funding will describe how the project is consistent with the approved program, including adherence to that program's decision process for selecting projects; identification of restoration approaches and techniques; metrics; how public engagement, education, and outreach were part of the selection of projects; and BAS justification. In addition, external BAS review of project workplans will occur, as appropriate.

For programs with implementation funds in Category 2 (budgeted as priorities for potential future funding), once planning on a project is completed and the sponsor is ready to initiate implementation, the FPL will be amended to move the implementation funds from Category 2 to Category 1 (approved). As part of this process, specific projects proposed for implementation will be noticed to eBlast subscribers for public comment prior to Council vote to move funds into Category 1. The public comment period will be 15 days for FPL amendments, except for the following, which will be open for comment for 30 days:

- Projects not previously publicly vetted by the Council
- Public notices with multiple proposed amendments

The Council retains discretion to modify these guidelines as appropriate.



All projects within programs will use consistent metrics and parameters to assess the effectiveness of funded activities in addressing previously-identified stressors at the watershed and/or regional scale. A program-level monitoring plan will identify the consistent metrics, parameters, data collection, and adaptive management procedures that will be conducted across projects under each program. This monitoring plan will follow the Council's Observational Data Plan Guidelines (i.e., monitoring guidelines) to ensure consistency with the program objectives.

Finally, the Council may also conduct future reviews of FPL 3b program implementation to assess whether additional actions could improve program effectiveness in meeting ecological goals and objectives and/or enhance transparency with the public. Such reviews would occur when there is more experience with program implementation to inform Council discussions, provide opportunities for sharing lessons learned across programs, and help advance the Council's Comprehensive Plan commitments.

**Comment:** A number of commenters suggested specific projects for the Council to consider funding within the FPL 3b programs.

**Response:** The Council thanks these commenters for their recommendations. Each FPL 3b program is administered by a sponsoring Council member, and each program has its own process for project selection. Accordingly, these project recommendations have been addressed in the section of this document that addresses comments regarding specific activities by location.

**Comment:** With respect to the conservation programs proposed in FPL 3b, one commenter recommended that the Council take into consideration a document entitled the "[Land Conservation Vision for the Gulf of Mexico Region](#)," a tool to identify priority areas for voluntary land conservation. This commenter also offered to provide regional support to the Council and associated proposal sponsors during implementation of the FPL 3b conservation activities, possibly including leveraging opportunities.

**Response:** The Council greatly appreciates this recommendation and the offer of support. The Council will ensure that each member with conservation programs in FPL 3b is provided a link to the referenced document and is informed of the partnership offer.

### **Technical Comments on Implementation of Proposed Activities**

**Comment:** One organization expressed support for the sediment placement technique, and beneficial use in particular, stating that all dredged material should be beneficially used, where possible, to reinforce shorelines with natural infrastructure to increase coastal resilience to sea level rise and coastal storms.

**Response:** The Council agrees that beneficial use of sediments is critical to coastal restoration and resilience and looks forward to delivering projects that employ this priority approach and technique.

**Comment:** One commenter is concerned that a number of the [FPL 3b](#) programs do not appear to have a clear connection to estuaries and/or the marine environment. This commenter also believes that more funding should be directed to coastal ecosystems, including features such as barrier islands, peninsulas, and headlands. This commenter acknowledged that funding projects and programs in upstream areas can make sense if the Council is trying to address a specific water quality problem, but questioned whether the upstream FPL 3b investments had such a clear justification.

**Response:** The Council fully agrees with the need to invest directly in the restoration of coastal resources. FPL 3b includes restoration funding for estuarine marshes, tidal flats, shorelines, beaches, dunes, and other coastal habitats. As acknowledged by the commenter, upstream restoration investments can also be needed to address coastal, estuarine, and marine environmental problems, with water quality being a prime example. Estuarine and marine water quality problems are often the result of cumulative impacts far removed from the coast. A range of restoration and conservation actions may be needed to address these upstream stressors in order to improve coastal environmental conditions. Upstream habitat preservation can prevent future development that could add additional pollutants that would adversely impact downstream estuarine waters. Forest restoration and agricultural Best Management Practices can similarly provide downstream benefits to both water quality and quantity. The RESTORE Act and associated U.S. Department of the Treasury regulations include a geographic limit that allows for upstream investments intended primarily to address downstream coastal problems. The FPL 3b investments in upstream restoration are intended to help address the goals and objectives in the Council's Comprehensive Plan, as well as specific stressors outlined in the Council's [2019 Planning Framework](#) for given geographic areas. Additional discussion of this matter can be found below in the Council's responses to comments regarding specific programs.

**Comment:** One commenter commended the Council's revised [FPL 3 Proposal Submission Guidelines and Review Process](#), including the guidance that proposals identify primary and secondary goals and the metrics that will be used to measure success. The commenter highlighted that, "...the guidance for metric selection that the Council has crafted clearly links priority approaches and restoration techniques with quantifiable metrics." This commenter was concerned, however, that one Council metric, "Acres of coastal habitat prevented from eroding," may underestimate the benefits of some restoration projects and suggested that the metric be broadened to more fully capture potential project and program benefits.

**Response:** The Council thanks this commenter for their careful attention to its metrics guidance and concurs that consistency in metrics across priority approaches and techniques will support the Council in its goal of demonstrating the success of Council investments across the Gulf. The Council also thanks the commenter for highlighting a potential limitation of one of the metrics the Council is currently using to track project success. The Council's [Observational Data Plan Interim Guidance](#) is currently being

updated by the Council's Monitoring and Assessment Workgroup (CMAWG). The updated observational data plan guidance will include recommendations on metrics and parameters for tracking project and program success. Council staff and the CMAWG will review the metric highlighted above and consider whether a revision to the metric is needed.

**Comment:** One commenter stressed that protecting land is the best thing the Council could do to help species survive and encouraged the Council to use as much funding as possible to buy environmentally sensitive lands.

**Response:** The Council agrees that habitat conservation has lasting and important benefits for the Gulf ecosystem, and encourages the commenter and all others interested in this technique to remain engaged as the Council implements the large-scale habitat conservation programs in FPL 3b, as well as in future FPL processes where such activities can be considered for additional funding.

## Other

**Comment:** Many commenters expressed support for [FPL 3b](#) activities that would benefit the Gulf's wildlife habitats, and the economies that depend on them. In particular, commenters stressed the importance of the Gulf Coast to birds, emphasizing the need to work as quickly as possible to heal the damage done to avian species as a result of the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill and other environmental disasters.

**Response:** The Council thanks these commenters for their support for the FPL 3b activities that will benefit wildlife. The Council recognizes the value of Gulf ecosystems to a wide array of species and the economies that rely on them. The Council also acknowledges that habitat degradation, including effects from the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill, have and will continue to impact avian species in the Gulf. While other funding partners have a specific goal of restoring bird populations in the Gulf (e.g., the Natural Resources Damage Assessment (NRDA) Trustee Council), several FPL 3b activities would benefit avian species through multiple habitat conservation and restoration actions.

**Comment:** Several commenters highlighted ties between ecosystem restoration and the economy of the Gulf Coast. In doing so, some expressed general support for the investments proposed in FPL 3b, underscoring the importance of activities that will provide holistic benefits to ecosystems and economies. Others elevated specific industries, such as ecotourism and fishing, that rely on a healthy ecosystem. One commenter shared concerns about ongoing impacts of the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill on property values for coastal communities.

**Response:** The Council values these commenters for highlighting the relationship between Gulf ecosystems and the economies that are tied to them. The Council's strategy for achieving a healthy Gulf is founded on the five Comprehensive Plan goals

that address habitat, water quality and quantity, coastal and marine resources, community resilience, and the Gulf economy. While a healthy ecosystem does benefit the economy, this goal does not apply directly to activities funded under Bucket 2 as provided by the [RESTORE Act](#). The activities proposed for funding under draft FPL 3b have, however, been developed with consideration of potential risks and benefits associated with the project or programs, including potential socio-economic impacts. For example, in addition to establishing large-scale programs to address water quality and quantity, habitat acquisition and conservation, and coastal resilience, FPL 3b continues funding for environmental job training for young adults across the Gulf, including youth from Federally recognized tribes.

**Comment:** Several commenters expressed the importance of acting as quickly as possible to implement large-scale restoration such as that included in FPL 3b, noting that it has been over a decade since the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill occurred.

**Response:** The Council shares the public's sense of urgency with respect to Gulf coast restoration. The pace at which the Council can disburse funding is dictated largely by the terms of the legal settlement resolving civil claims against BP arising from the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill. Under this settlement, BP makes annual deposits to the Trust Fund over a 15-year period extending to 2031. The Council cannot obligate funds for an activity until those funds have been deposited into the Trust Fund.

Within these funding constraints, the Council endeavors to advance approved coastal restoration projects as quickly as possible. The Council must balance the interest in moving quickly with the equally important need to include the public in the process and ensure all funds are properly administered. Proper administration includes ensuring that all activities are in compliance with applicable federal funding requirements and environmental laws. As stated in its [Fiscal Year 2020 Annual Report to Congress](#), the Council obligated \$144.4 million through grants and interagency agreements in fiscal year 2020 to implement projects and programs under the RESTORE Act, bringing the total amount awarded by the Council to \$398.75 million. Upon the approval of FPL 3b, the Council will be in a position to begin obligating over \$300 million of additional coastal restoration funds across the Gulf. The Council will continue working to move this funding into on-the-ground restoration projects as efficiently as possible while not compromising on its commitment to public transparency and sound fiscal management.

**Comment:** Many commenters described continued effects of the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill on wildlife, habitat, and the economy, including an observation that the hurricanes of 2020 remobilized residual oil.

**Response:** The Council appreciates the concerns expressed regarding the impacts of the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill. Acute events (e.g., hurricanes, major river floods, or oil spills) may occur throughout the lifetime of the Council's work, and the Council seeks to be adaptive to addressing those events to the extent that they impact the Council's

mission of ecosystem restoration. For example, in response to the devastating effects of Hurricane Harvey on the Texas coast and the people who live there, the Council approved a Texas State Expenditure Plan (under the Spill Impact Component, a separate component of the RESTORE Act) that directs funds to a range of programs designed to help address those impacts and improve coastal resiliency.

**Comment:** Many comments, while related to the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill or other restoration and protection efforts in the Gulf of Mexico, did not specifically address draft FPL 3b. Additional comments were received that did not pertain to the Gulf Coast Region or ecosystem restoration.

**Response:** The Council acknowledges and appreciates these additional comments. To the extent that they may be relevant to future business, the Council will take them into consideration.

**Comment:** A total of 1,864 members of the Audubon Society submitted a form letter. In some instances, individual members edited the form letter with their own unique comments.

**Response:** The Council appreciates the broad interest demonstrated by these form letters, as well as the organizing required for such campaigns. The content of the duplicate correspondence, including the unique comments added by individuals, has been addressed in other comment summaries and associated responses.

**Comment:** Several clarifying questions on the public comment period process and statements of intent to submit written comments were made during the public webinars hosted by the Council at the start of the draft FPL 3b public comment period.

**Response:** During these webinars, the Council provided answers to process-related questions and recorded all comments received during those meetings. Such questions have been included in the FPL 3b Compiled Comments document for completeness of the Council's record on all information submitted by the public during those meetings.

## Comments Regarding Specific Proposed Activities (Organized by Geographic Location)

### Texas

#### Texas General Comments

**Comment:** One commenter expressed general support for draft FPL 3b, and in particular emphasized support for the four proposed Texas programs (the *Chenier Plain Ecosystem Restoration Program*, *Texas Coastal Water Quality*

*Program, Shoreline Protection Through Living Shorelines, and Texas Land Acquisition Program for Coastal Conservation*), recognizing their potential to vitally contribute to the resiliency, protection, and conservation of Texas' vast coastline, marshes, bays, and other ecosystems.

**Response:** The Council greatly appreciates the commenter's support of [FPL 3b](#), including the four large-scale ecosystem restoration and conservation programs proposed in Texas.

**Comment:** One commenter asked for a list of projects that were recommended for funding under a Texas FPL 3b program, and whether there is still an opportunity to submit projects for funding under this program. Another commenter asked how specific projects will be selected under the FPL 3b programs listed for Texas.

**Response:** In support of developing potential FPL 3b submissions, Texas, with the input of state and federal natural resource agencies, NGOs, and county judges, assembled a [list of 23 potential projects](#) which was posted on the Texas RESTORE website for public comment and presented at two public hearings in late 2019. Through continued engagement, it was determined that program- rather than project-specific proposals would be submitted for FPL 3b to ensure that the 23 projects posted for public comment could be considered in at least one of the program submissions. The process for selection of FPL 3b grant recipients will include the requirement that projects will have already been vetted by this process or through other public processes such as the Texas General Land Office's (GLO)'s Coastal Resiliency Master Plan or NRDA- and/or National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF)-related activities. At this time, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) does not intend to request submission of additional project ideas and will use the amount of funds available and the criteria stated in the Texas portion of the FPL 3b document to select from the list of 23 previously identified projects. However, if an unexpected or unique situation or need arises, a project that is not currently included in the list of 23 projects, but that meets the criteria, including vetting by one or more state entities, may be considered.

## **Texas Coastal Water Quality Program**

**Comment:** Multiple comments were received in support of the *Texas Coastal Water Quality Program* and its proposed approaches and techniques to restore hydrology and natural processes, including hydrologic connectivity, freshwater inflows and natural salinity regimes, and to reduce excess nutrients and pollutants. Support was also received for the program's proposed metrics. One commenter highlighted that this program would be a turning point in Texas' coastal restoration as it begins to address Texas' freshwater inflow problems in a significant way.

**Response:** The Council appreciates the support offered for this water quality program and looks forward to realizing water quality improvements in coastal Texas.

**Comment:** One commenter stated that this program should not be funded as proposed. This commenter believes the program lacks detail and should be focused on known estuarine and marine water quality concerns rather than just broad water quality. The commenter recommends that efforts consider the importance of stream size and nutrients sources' proximity to streams, and also use SPATIALLY Referenced Regressions On Watershed (SPARROW) nutrient loading estimates to target sources of nutrients and their control to effect change in coastal ecosystems. The commenter supports a focus on Baffin Bay to address water quality nutrient impacts, but feels that the causes and sources of excessive nutrients and the actions proposed to address these impacts are not clearly explained. The commenter does not support taking actions in San Antonio Bay due to no known problems with hypoxia, impacts to seagrasses from nutrient loading, or evidence of harmful algal blooms.

**Response:** In its [2019 Planning Framework](#), the Council identified restoring water quality and freshwater inflows on the Texas coast as a critical priority for Gulf coast restoration and feels that a coordinated program under FPL 3b will result in tangible benefits. The Council thanks the commenter for the technical feedback related to targeting water quality projects and will consider these suggestions while further developing a process for selecting locations for water quality enhancements that build on Texas' previously conducted, stakeholder-driven process. Water Quality concerns vary along the coast and each estuary has a unique set of problems that will be considered as decisions are made on the specific projects that will receive program grant funds.

**Comment:** Two commenters offered support for the *Texas Coastal Water Quality Program*. One stated that dissolved organic nitrogen concentrations are two to three times higher in Baffin Bay than other Texas estuaries, and that water quality restoration funding is urgently needed to address harmful algal blooms in Baffin Bay.

**Response:** While decisions have not been made as to the specific projects that would be funded under this program, the Council thanks these commenters for expressing the need for water quality improvements in this watershed.

**Comment:** Two commenters expressed that the *Texas Coastal Water Quality Program* would benefit from narrowing its scope to not include potential activities that could alternatively be funded under the *Shoreline Protection Through Living Shorelines* program. While these commenters do not oppose funding for living

shoreline work, they believe inclusion under the *Texas Coastal Water Quality Program* may be redundant and that the water quality benefits of living shorelines are not the primary reason for pursuing such techniques.

**Response:** Texas recognizes that the *Texas Coastal Water Quality Program* does include similar living shoreline elements included in the *Shoreline Protection Through Living Shorelines* program. As such, Texas may consider excluding stand-alone living shoreline activities and instead include them in the more applicable program. There may be cases, however, where a water quality project includes a living shoreline component that could be considered under the *Texas Coastal Water Quality Program*.

**Comment:** One commenter expressed concern that only six Texas coastal counties are identified for potential *Texas Coastal Water Quality Program* activities.

**Response:** The six counties highlighted for the *Texas Coastal Water Quality Program* on the FPL 3b Figure 5 map and listed in the [activity description](#) depict the areas where the greatest amount of interest and importance for water quality programs was identified during Texas' project solicitation process. These areas were highlighted by state, federal, and NGO working groups that Texas convened, as well as outreach efforts by Texas to county judges and the public. The future project selection process will consider what provides the greatest value to the coastal environment now and in the future as the human and natural landscapes continue to evolve. As the program sponsor, TCEQ anticipates that selections will be made from the list of previously identified projects. However, if an unexpected or unique situation or need arises, a project that is not currently included in the list of projects that meets the criteria, including vetting by one or more state entities, may be considered. The TCEQ will use expert input from the working groups who have collaborated on developing Texas' FPL 3b programs and continued input from stakeholders to make project selections from those projects that were posted in late 2019 for public comment.

**Comment:** One commenter sought clarification as to whether freshwater inflow enhancements under this program will be limited to improving drainage channels and outfalls, or if other means of providing freshwater inflows be considered. Furthermore, the commenter asked that if other means will in fact be eligible, whether there will be limitations on the types of projects that the Council will consider.

**Response:** During Texas' FPL 3b development process, drainage channel improvements were highlighted by state, federal, and NGO working groups as beneficial in the areas identified as priorities for water quality enhancement activities. Although the program specifically mentions drainage channel



improvements, other techniques to improve freshwater inflows will be considered and the specific projects selected will consider best practices and solutions to making enhancements to the natural environment.

**Comment:** One commenter expressed opposition to the use of water quality restoration funding to fund local government's drainage infrastructure needs, citing that this could be a potential misuse of restoration funding. The commenter further questioned whether the Council will fund states to upgrade drainage (stormwater) systems, even if such projects would not demonstrate actual environmental benefits. A second commenter offered that if water quality restoration funding is in fact to be used for infrastructure, any funded projects should be nature-based infrastructure and not cause harm to the environment.

**Response:** The overall goal of the Council and this program is to improve the natural environment and not to fund storm drainage solutions primarily for community development. However, the program may address areas where adding proper storm drainage would enhance natural environments downstream.

### **Chenier Plain Ecosystem Restoration Program**

**Comment:** Multiple comments were received strongly supporting the *Chenier Plain Ecosystem Restoration Program* at the full funding level, including one which noted a preference for more funding dedicated to this program. Support was offered for the program as a whole, specifically for beneficial use of sediment as a technique, and as expressed support for the proposal's clear identification of restoration needs, activities, and partners.

**Response:** The Council appreciates this support and looks forward to continuing to implement restoration projects in the Chenier Plain portion of the Texas coast.

**Comment:** One commenter opposes use of RESTORE funds to impound coastal marsh or to repair or replace degraded water control structures that serve such impoundments and semi-impoundments because these activities alter natural wetland functions and may not effectively reduce wetland loss, sometimes instead enhancing subsidence and wetland loss. The commenter specifically asks whether the Council will fund impoundment of coastal wetlands. A second comment was received offering support for the program in general, but recommending that levee repairs not be funded through FPL 3b.

**Response:** The Council acknowledges that the creation of impoundments and levees can adversely affect coastal hydrology and wetland health. The specific projects selected under this program will consider best practices and solutions to making enhancements to the natural environment while minimizing alterations of natural processes.

**Comment:** One commenter submitted concerns regarding potential sediment contamination in dredged materials proposed for marsh creation and enhancement, recommending that all sediments proposed for use under this program be tested for a broad suite of contaminants, including dioxins. The commenter referenced previous dredged material testing results that may suggest material used in restoration in this area was contaminated. The commenter also stated that RESTORE funds would be better used under this program to test wetlands created and/or enhanced in the past using dredged material, for contaminants, including Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT), Dichlorodiphenyldichloroethane (DDD), Dichlorodiphenyldichloroethylene (DDE), dieldrin, and other similar legacy pesticides, as well as dioxins and furans.

**Response:** The Council acknowledges that sediments proposed for use in ecosystem restoration might be contaminated in some specific locations and should therefore be tested in those locations prior to use to determine suitability. Potential adverse effects of any proposed dredging or sediment placement in waters of the U.S. is always analyzed during the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' (USACE) permitting process (or the associated civil works project review process) and the proposed restoration design is subject to interagency coordination and review. This review includes evaluation of the potential for dredged material to cause adverse environmental impacts due to contamination. The Council believes sediment placement is an essential restoration technique in Gulf coast estuaries, and proper evaluation and review of sediment data by natural resource agency experts will serve to mitigate any future credible risk. At this time, the Council is not considering sediment contaminant testing of soils utilized in past restoration projects that were completed without RESTORE funding.

**Comment:** One commenter believes this program proposal is vague and stated that this program should not be funded as proposed.

**Response:** The Council believes that restoring and conserving coastal habitats within the Chenier Plain complex of Texas is a critical priority for Gulf coast restoration and that a coordinated and collaborative program under FPL 3b will result in tangible benefits to diverse fish and wildlife resources and coastal resiliency. While the program currently identifies restoration methods and initial success metrics, additional program details will emerge and be refined as Texas develops criteria for project funding that consider project efficacy in meeting objectives and improving the environment, resiliency, and synergy with other projects on the Chenier Plain. Specific activity details will emerge as individual projects are identified and selected.

**Comment:** Comments were received expressing strong support for providing funding under this program to augment previously secured restoration funding for

the McFaddin Beach Berm and Dune Restoration Project in Jefferson County. To the contrary, one commenter does not support providing any funding for construction of artificial clay "berms" landward of the beach along the Gulf of Mexico shoreline.

**Response:** Texas has not made a decision regarding which projects will be funded under this program; however, funding for the McFaddin Beach Berm and Dune Restoration Project emerged as a potential priority for the region consistently during prior coordination with state and federal resource agencies, NGOs, and the public. In 2013, the Salt Bayou Marsh Workgroup (Workgroup) published a restoration plan describing the status of the Texas Chenier Plain, a review of past and ongoing projects, and recommendations for future work which includes the McFaddin Beach Berm and Dune Restoration Project as a restoration priority. Workgroup members include federal and state agencies, NGOs, and local and regional governments. This FPL 3b program would further leverage the decades of experience and technical recommendations of the Workgroup and other stakeholders to implement priority activities in this region.

**Comment:** One commenter is concerned that RESTORE funding under this program could be used improperly to assist private companies in meeting compensatory mitigation requirements.

**Response:** The Council will not fund implementation of compensatory mitigation under FPL 3b unless that mitigation is required as a component of a restoration project that is otherwise eligible to receive funding under the [RESTORE Act](#) Council-Selected Restoration Component. For example, if a Council-funded marsh restoration project would result in unavoidable impacts to an oyster reef, RESTORE funding could be utilized to perform that mitigation.

### **Texas Land Acquisition Program for Coastal Conservation**

**Comment:** Several comments were received that confirm a broad level of strong support for the *Texas Land Acquisition Program for Coastal Conservation*. Commenters look forward to continued success in acquiring large tracts of land that are critical to preventing coastal habitat loss, maintaining habitat for birds and other wildlife, providing open space, and buffering communities from the impacts of tropical storms.

**Response:** The Council greatly appreciates these comments and looks forward to continuing to build upon and greatly expand its initial successes in land acquisition as a key restoration approach essential to the ecological health and future of coastal Texas.

**Comment:** One commenter does not feel that an appropriate set of scientific criteria for identifying and prioritizing land to be acquired under this program has

been developed and that it should not be funded as proposed. Recognizing that RESTORE is a coastal restoration program and that barrier islands and barrier shorelines are at very high risk of unregulated development, the commenter believes these habitats should be the highest priority for acquisition, but they are not currently mentioned in the [activity description](#) for this program. This commenter also feels that tidal flats should be purchased as a priority for acquisition and preservation, since they are a unique and valuable coastal habitat facing severe threats from development and degradation with limited demonstrated success when it comes to restoration. The commenter does not support prioritizing acquisition of estuarine herbaceous wetlands since they are protected by wetlands regulatory programs and their restoration is well understood. Finally, the commenter believes that preservation of non-estuarine wetlands higher in the watershed should not be the highest priority because their link to coastal health is only through water quality, and feels that wetlands at risk of logging or mining should receive a higher priority because they face threats that are not regulated.

**Response:** The Council appreciates suggestions regarding further refinement of the priorities for land acquisition. The program's project selection process will consider acquisition projects that were included in the [list of 23 projects](#) that was posted for public comment in late 2019, and will use the [Strategic Conservation Assessment \(SCA\) Tool Suite](#) funded by the Council to identify locations that provide the greatest value to the coastal environment. Additional natural and human environmental data and analyses will also be evaluated to select the most vulnerable areas at risk from ongoing degradation and future natural or human impacts. While not explicitly listed in the [activity description](#) for this program, no habitat types are being excluded from potential acquisition, including forested wetlands and barrier islands. Additionally, the Council recognizes the value and importance of tidal flats in the estuarine environment, and they will not be excluded from consideration when selecting potential lands for acquisition. The Council also notes that the FPL 3b activity, the [Wind-Tidal Flat Restoration Pilot](#) project, aims to better understand how to implement successful restoration techniques on Texas coastal tidal flats and will provide research on best practices for restoration of this type of habitat.

## **Shoreline Protection Through Living Shorelines**

**Comment:** Several comments were received recommending that Texas consider funding beach nourishment and breakwater construction at Sargent Beach under the *Shoreline Protection Through Living Shorelines* program. Commenters support funding a project at Sargent Beach due to extreme erosion at this location, the urgent need to restore and protect beach and marsh habitat, to protect a bird sanctuary, the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway (GIWW), and other coastal property.

**Response:** The Council thanks commenters for their support of the *Shoreline Protection Through Living Shorelines* program in general, and acknowledges the specific recommendation that the Council consider funding living shoreline work at Sargent Beach. These comments will be considered as Texas works to identify specific projects that meet this program's intent to construct individual, large-scale living shorelines that protect large tracts of land and coastal resources, targeting highly eroding shorelines along the GIWW, vulnerable bay shorelines, and other locations that have been identified as suitable areas for living shoreline installation.

**Comment:** Support was received from one organization for this program, citing its potential to protect shorelines, provide habitat for fish and wildlife, improve water quality, and provide benefits to coastal communities. Support was also expressed for this program's potential to fund living shoreline projects from the Texas GLO's Coastal Resiliency Master Plan.

**Response:** The Council appreciates this positive feedback and agrees that funding living shoreline work will provide the numerous restoration benefits of reducing erosion-induced habitat loss. The program will apply nature-based solutions to protect and restore habitat for fish and wildlife, as well as support resilient coastal communities. As stated in the [activity description](#) for this program, the process for selection of FPL 3b grant recipients under this program will include the requirement that projects will have to already be vetted by Texas's months long outreach process used to develop its initial FPL 3b proposal submissions, or through other public processes such as the GLO's Coastal Resiliency Master Plan, or NRDA- and/or NFWF-related activities.

### **Wind-Tidal Flat Restoration Pilot**

**Comment:** Comments were received supporting the *Wind-Tidal Flat Restoration Pilot* project, noting it will be a first of its kind effort to restore natural tidal flat habitats, and that lessons and techniques learned will be a crucial step to informing future restoration of thousands of acres of tidal flats.

**Response:** The Council appreciates this support and looks forward to working with partners to successfully develop new restoration techniques through this pilot to lay the groundwork needed to guide future tidal flat restoration success.

**Comment:** One commenter expressed support for the need to prioritize tidal flat restoration and preservation while offering comments on habitat acquisition priorities expressed in the *Texas Land Acquisition Program for Coastal Conservation*. However, the commenter believed that other U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) needs, such as sea turtle research, should be funded rather than the original proposal submitted by DOI entitled *Decommissioning Onshore Orphaned Energy Facilities on NPS and FWS Lands*.

**Response:** The Council concurs that wind-tidal flat habitats are an important and unique coastal habitat and are threatened. As stated in the [activity description](#) for this project, the [original DOI proposal](#), titled “Decommissioning Onshore Orphaned Energy Facilities on NPS and FWS Lands”, was modified to focus only on the wind-tidal flat restoration component as a pilot project at Padre Island National Seashore. This was done after feedback was received from the Council’s internal and external reviews and further collaboration among Council members to determine the activities and funding levels to include in draft FPL 3b. If funded, this pilot would test various tidal flat restoration techniques and assess their efficacy and cost effectiveness to provide lessons learned that can be applied to other tidal flat sites in need of restoration. The Council has no current plans to fund the original DOI proposal in full under FPL 3b. Regarding the commenter’s support for other DOI programs, there was no proposal regarding other programs which had been submitted for FPL 3b consideration. Thus, this comment is beyond the scope of these responses.

## Mississippi

### Mississippi General Comments

**Comment:** The Council received a comment in support of all proposals submitted by the state of Mississippi

**Response:** The Council appreciates the support for coastal restoration in Mississippi and looks forward to realizing water quality and habitat improvements.

### Coastal Nearshore Habitat Restoration and Development Program in Mississippi

**Comment:** The Council received comments in support of the beneficial use of dredged sediments to accomplish habitat restoration and creation goals in Mississippi. One commenter noted that using dredged material for habitat restoration is a good way to reinforce shorelines with natural infrastructure. The commenters encouraged the program to focus on selecting the highest priority sites that would promote the greatest restoration and habitat creation benefit while utilizing local expertise for vetting and design of projects.

**Response:** The Council appreciates the support for coastal restoration in Mississippi with the programs proposed. The Council agrees that beneficial use of sediments is critical to coastal restoration and resilience and looks forward to delivering projects that employ this priority approach and technique. As part of the [activity description](#) for this program, Mississippi described the decision process it will follow in selecting projects to fund. With respect to specific project

ideas/proposals for the program, community members and other stakeholders are encouraged to submit new restoration project ideas or make revisions to previously submitted project ideas via the [Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality Restoration Project Idea Portal](#).

### **Water Quality Improvement Program for Coastal Mississippi Waters**

**Comment:** The Council received comments in support of the *Water Quality Improvement Program for Coastal Mississippi Waters*. One commenter expressed strong support for repairing wastewater/sewer systems along the coast. This commenter suggested that a transition from gravity-fed to more pressurized systems may be needed, and requested guidance identifying projects and funding sources for Moss Point, Mississippi.

**Response:** The Council appreciates the support for this water quality program. As part of the [activity description](#) for this program, Mississippi described the decision process it will follow in selecting projects to fund. With respect to specific project proposals for the program, community members and other stakeholders are encouraged to submit new restoration project ideas or make revisions to previously submitted project ideas via the [Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality Restoration Project Idea Portal](#).

**Comment:** One commenter provided specific recommendations regarding the process and selection criteria for choosing projects within this program. The commenter recommended that the program criteria and selection process should ensure that projects are not approved for infrastructure or stormwater drainage that does not provide a clear benefit to water quality.

**Response:** The Council appreciates the recommendations from this commenter regarding selection of projects within this program. As part of the [activity description](#) for this program, Mississippi described the decision process it will follow in selecting projects to fund. As the planning portion of this program gets underway, Mississippi may review its decision process and determine whether adjustments are warranted to ensure that the highest priority projects are being selected that may benefit the goals of the program. In selecting projects to implement under the program, Mississippi will take into consideration BAS, available water quality data, and coordination activities with appropriate stakeholders (e.g., coastal municipalities, etc.) to determine which project(s) under the program provide water quality benefits to Mississippi's coastal waters.

## Alabama

### Alabama General Comments

**Comment:** The Council received comments supporting the restoration activities proposed by the state of Alabama to address ecosystem restoration needs. There was concern about federally-sponsored activities that would take place in Alabama. The commenter indicated the projects do not appear to obviously affect the estuaries and/or the marine environment in Alabama.

**Response:** The Council appreciates the support for restoration projects and programs in Alabama. Please see responses to concerns expressed about the federal activities benefiting coastal Alabama in the sections of this document regarding the following activities: *Develop Ecological Flow Decision-Support for Mobile River and Perdido River Basins* project, *Gulf Coast Conservation Reserve Program*, *Enhancing Gulf Waters through Forested Watershed Restoration*, and *Gulf of Mexico Coast Conservation Corps (GulfCorps) Program*.

### Enhancing Hydrologic Connectivity in Justin's Bay (Mobile Bay)

**Comment:** The Council received a comment in support of the restoration of natural hydrologic connectivity between the Mobile-Tensaw Delta and Mobile Bay.

**Response:** The Council appreciates the support for restoration of hydrologic connectivity in northern Mobile Bay, Alabama.

### Perdido Watershed Water Quality Improvements and Restoration Assessment Program

**Comment:** The Council received comments in support of this modeling project to coordinate the location and sequencing of selected restoration projects in the Perdido Watershed and the use of science-based indicators to measure the collective restoration impacts to water quality of all projects implemented in this watershed. One commenter requested this project coordinate with the Pensacola & Perdido Bays Estuary Program Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan.

**Response:** The Council appreciates the support for science-based restoration planning and assessment. The described purpose of the project to, "coordinate the location and sequencing of selected restoration projects in the Perdido Watershed" could provide valuable input to the Pensacola & Perdido Bays Estuary Program Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan when complete, as well as to the planning efforts of other organizations. That outreach will be coordinated as part of the management of this program with budget and



staffing constraints considered. The Council thanks the commenter for the suggestion.

## **Develop Ecological Flow Decision-Support for Mobile River and Perdido River Basins**

**Comment:** One commenter was supportive of the *Develop Ecological Flow Decision-Support for Mobile River and Perdido River Basins* project, noting that the development of a basin-wide model that can be used to inform water management decisions regarding the timing and distribution of freshwater inflows would support the health of the Mobile and Perdido Bay estuaries. Another commenter voiced concerns that the project would not provide the appropriate benefit to the Mobile and Perdido Bay estuaries and appears to be intended to provide data for broader questions than those specific to the coastal environment.

**Response:** The Council agrees with the first commenter that the work proposed by this project would provide benefits to both the Mobile and Perdido Bay estuaries. Regarding the second comment, the Council believes investments in the upper watershed can provide meaningful downstream benefits. The accounting of streamflow in the basin and understanding of trends throughout the watershed will help provide better understanding of 1) salinity variability in the lower basin and 2) how alterations in streamflow will affect the freshwater/saltwater interface within the Mobile and Perdido Bay estuaries.

Additionally, the primary Comprehensive Plan objective of this proposed activity is to improve science-based decision-making processes. The Council has committed not only to coastal restoration, but also to improving the use of science and decision-support tools, such as the basin-wide model described in this proposal, in coastal restoration. The Council sees the many datasets and analyses that will be produced as part of the project as an opportunity to help meet its science commitments by leveraging data across a broad geographic area and by providing a science-based decision-support resource for use by the Council, as well as the larger Gulf research and restoration community. If you would like more information regarding the benefits of this program, please contact the Council at [RestoreCouncil@RestoreTheGulf.gov](mailto:RestoreCouncil@RestoreTheGulf.gov).

## **Florida**

### **Florida General Comments**

**Comment:** One commenter expressed support for all proposed projects located in Alabama and Florida, particularly with respect to large-scale programs that would address water quality and quantity, habitat acquisition and conservation,

coastal resilience, and other ecosystem restoration needs in the Gulf Coast region.

**Response:** The Council appreciates the support for the [FPL 3b](#) programs.

### **Florida Gulf Coast Resiliency Program**

**Comment:** The Council received comments supporting the *Florida Gulf Coast Resiliency Program*. One commenter recommended increasing the proportion of dollars allocated to implementing projects in this program. Commenters also recommended the Council consider specific projects in this program, including the White Island/Pensacola Bay Living Shoreline and St. Joe Timberland acquisition.

**Response:** The Council appreciates the support for this resiliency program, and acknowledges the suggested projects for program funding consideration. FPL 3b addresses ecosystem needs across the Gulf. The combined cost of the activities proposed by the Council members for FPL 3b exceeded the amount of funds projected to be available when the Council votes on FPL 3b. There was not enough funding available to meet all the ecosystem needs identified by the members. Due to this funding constraint, the Council had to balance the ecosystem needs across the Gulf. The funding levels for the projects and programs in FPL 3b reflect the Council's effort to address important ecosystem needs across the Gulf in a way that is supported by all Council members. Funding for an activity in FPL 3b could be increased in a future FPL if the Council determines that such an additional investment would further the goals and objectives set for in the Council's Comprehensive Plan. With respect to specific project ideas for the program to fund, Florida will issue a public notice to solicit project proposals and encourages the public to submit project ideas at that time.

### **Florida Gulf Coast Tributaries Hydrologic Restoration Program**

**Comment:** Commenters expressed support for the *Florida Gulf Coast Tributaries Hydrologic Restoration Program*, noting that development and roadway construction has disrupted natural water flow across Florida. This has resulted in detrimental effects on the region's natural communities. One commenter recommended funding projects that restore natural water flow and enhance both estuarine ecosystems and wildlife habitat. A number of commenters recommended the Council consider specific projects in this program, specifically restoration of hydrology along the SR29 corridor by implementing the North Belle Meade Rehydration project and a SR29/Okaloacoochee Slough/Fakahatchee Strand Hydrological Restoration initiative. Another commenter asked whether specific activities in this program would be selected based on prioritization, including demonstrated impact to estuarine or marine environments.

**Response:** The Council appreciates the support for this hydrologic restoration program and acknowledges the suggested projects for program funding consideration. As part of the [activity description](#) for this program, Florida described the decision process it will follow in selecting projects to fund, focusing on restoration of hydrologic connectivity and natural salinity regimes in watersheds along the Gulf Coast. To maintain its focus on improve estuarine and coastal waters within Florida, project selection criteria will prioritize projects included in other state or federal restoration planning documents, such as Basin Management Action Plans (BMAPs), Minimum Flows and Minimum Water Levels (MFLs), Surface Water Implementation and Management (SWIM) plans, the Florida State Expenditure Plan, and NRDA FL Trustee Implementation Group restoration plans which identify both the need and benefits of such projects, and which are based on strong science. Florida's selection criteria would ensure that individual projects, implemented collectively, would contribute to large-scale water quality and quantity and habitat restoration benefits by reestablishing natural hydrology and connectivity between freshwater and marine habitats. With respect to specific project ideas for the program to fund, Florida will issue a public notice to solicit project proposals and encourages the public to submit ideas at that time.

### **Florida Water Quality Improvement Program**

**Comment:** Commenters also expressed support for the *Florida Water Quality Improvement Program*, noting its potential to improve water quality and quantity along the Gulf Coast in a way that supports healthier fish and wildlife habitat. One commenter appreciated the explicit statement that that projects in the program will not be implemented to support new growth or development. Commenters also recommended the Council consider specific projects in this program, including the Sub-Collier Regional Water Quality Feasibility Study, the Howard Frankland Causeway Circulation Enhancement, and the Picayune Watershed Water Quality Feasibility Study. One commenter stressed that project selection in this program should prioritize actions that would have the greatest impact on estuaries and marine waters.

**Response:** The Council appreciates the support for this water quality program and acknowledges the suggested projects for program funding consideration. As part of the [activity description](#) for this program, Florida described the decision process it will follow in selecting projects to fund including project environmental benefits, as well as the opportunity to leverage or combine projects to deliver cumulative benefits to the Gulf. Funded projects will be intrinsically linked with restoration or conservation water resource improvement projects with the primary goal of reducing excess nutrients and other pollutants to the Gulf. Project selection criteria will prioritize projects included in other state or federal restoration planning documents, such as BMAPs and SWIM plans that identify both the need and benefits of such projects and which are based on strong

science. To leverage funds already invested throughout Florida's Gulf coast watersheds to improve water quality, hydrology, and habitats, projects for the program will be evaluated for their potential to help restore or maintain natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, beaches, and coastal wetlands. With respect to specific project ideas for the program to fund, Florida will issue a public notice to solicit project proposals and encourages the public to submit ideas at that time.

### **Florida Strategic Gulf Coast Land Acquisition Program**

**Comment:** A number of commenters expressed support for the *Florida Strategic Gulf Coast Land Acquisition Program*. Some recommended that project selection focus on lands that are on the Florida Forever Priority list in the Critical Natural Lands and Climate Change category, and mentioned projects associated with the Apalachicola River and St. Joe Timberland. Some commenters emphasized a need to define and manage for a new coastline in low-lying areas that will result from sea level rise. One commenter asked whether projects would be selected based on a prioritization that emphasized projects with direct impacts to estuarine or marine environments.

**Response:** The Council appreciates the support for this program and acknowledges the acquisition suggestions. As part of the [activity description](#) for this program, Florida described the decision process it will follow to identify priority parcels for land acquisitions to fund by utilizing Florida Forever, the state's premier conservation and recreation lands acquisition program. Focusing on Critical Natural Lands and Climate Change Lands categories of Florida Forever in watersheds that are hydrologically connected to the Gulf will strengthen coastal resources and mitigate a number of impacts resulting from climate change by providing opportunities to protect riparian habitat and coastal lands or barrier islands, and otherwise mitigate or adapt to the effects of sea-level rise and flooding.

### **Apalachicola Regional Restoration Initiative: Strategies 2 & 3**

**Comment:** The Council received comments in support of the *Apalachicola Regional Restoration Initiative (ARRI): Strategies 2 & 3*. One commenter opposed this program, questioning whether it would have a significant effect on coastal water quality or habitats. This commenter asked for an explanation of the estuarine water quality problem that this program is helping to address.

**Response:** The Council appreciates the support for this program. As noted in the section above regarding technical comments, estuarine and marine water quality problems are often the result of cumulative impacts removed from the coast. Upstream restoration investments can be needed to address coastal, estuarine, and marine environmental problems. As discussed in the [activity description](#) for

this program, this is the case in the Apalachicola Bay system, particularly with respect to water quality and freshwater inflow.

Freshwater inflows from upland forests in coastal watersheds are critical elements that structure physical, biogeochemical, and hydrologic conditions in near-shore coastal systems, and thus the biological communities that inhabit them. Timing, quantity, and quality of freshwater flows from forests change salinity and total suspended solid levels, which directly impact riverine and estuarine productivity, and the distribution and lifecycles of species that rely upon these habitats. For example, significant reductions in freshwater discharge from the Apalachicola River have resulted from greater upstream storage and use coinciding with noticeable reduction in productivity of Apalachicola's commercially and culturally important seafood industries for decades. The loss of freshwater discharge to the Apalachicola Estuary and Bay has contributed to a general decline in population and diversity of the Apalachicola fisheries industry, leading to social and economic harm to the residents of the region. Communities in the region have experienced hardship, job loss, and economic disruption from declining fisheries.

The ARRI will improve and maintain healthy ecosystem services including water storage and filtration in upland forests, wetlands, and coastal ecosystems. In the Apalachicola region, dense pine plantations targeted for treatment will improve healthy, open canopy longleaf ecosystems and thus allow more precipitation to percolate into the shallow surficial aquifer, streams/rivers, and ultimately into estuaries and bays. Targeted hydrologic restoration will restore natural sheet flow and improve water quality by increasing sediment retention, nutrient assimilation, and aquatic organism passage. The ARRI will accelerate forest restoration, provide benefits to coastal communities and ecosystems, and create increased continuity and acreage of actively managed forests leading to expanded public benefits in the form of water quality protections, water recharge, improved wildlife habitat, cleaner air, better quality of life, and expanded economic activity.

## Gulfwide

### Gulf Coast Conservation Reserve Program

**Comment:** The Council received comments in support of the *Gulf Coast Conservation Reserve (GCCRP) Program*. One commenter asked why the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) map for this program excludes Escambia county, while Escambia County is mentioned in the narrative. Another commenter opposed this program, questioning whether it would have a significant effect on coastal water quality or habitats.

**Response:** The Council appreciates the support for this program. As noted in the section above regarding technical comments, estuarine and marine water quality problems are often the result of cumulative impacts removed from the coast. Upstream restoration investments can be needed to address coastal, estuarine, and marine environmental problems. As discussed in the [activity description](#) for this program, the goal of this activity is to provide downstream ecological benefits through upstream watershed restoration and conservation.

The health of the Gulf depends upon the health of its estuaries, and the health of those estuaries is influenced by what happens upstream along tributary rivers. The GCCRP will continue to help improve ecosystems recovery across the region. As conservation measures clean and conserve water and restore and sustain critical natural resources and wildlife habitats, the public and environment benefits. The GCCRP, as one of the activities in a suite of restoration measures in [FPL 3b](#), will holistically address the degradation of Gulf ecosystems. Technical and financial assistance is being provided to assist landowners with improving water quality through practices such as nutrient management, erosion control, irrigation efficiency, and conservation tillage. These practices all lead to cleaner water flowing downstream into the Gulf.

The GCCRP conservation measures will address the loss of sediment and restore the impacted habitat. Restoration and conservation efforts to address water quality and natural systems require a range of strategies. Among these are additional improvements in the treatment and management of stormwater runoff; continued implementation of best management practices for agriculture, silviculture, and construction; and additional efforts to improve wastewater treatment and management. To complement these strategies, long-term protection of critical habitats and associated buffer areas will further help protect water resources. For example, see [information related to the Pensacola Bay System SWIM program](#). Similar conservation/restoration measures are planned for coastal watersheds in Alabama and Mississippi. The continuation of funding for this program leverages the investments and commitments of the [2015 Initial FPL](#).

Finally, the USDA map for this program is accurate in excluding Escambia county. The narrative should also have excluded Escambia County and has been corrected.

### **Enhancing Gulf Waters Through Forested Watershed Restoration**

**Comment:** The Council received comments in support of the *Enhancing Gulf Waters Through Forested Watershed Restoration* program. Some emphasized the importance of watersheds to Gulf restoration, and the need to maintain or restore water quality and natural freshwater flows to sustain the health of estuaries and the Gulf as a whole. One commenter opposed this program,

questioning whether it would have a significant effect on coastal water quality or habitats.

**Response:** The Council appreciates the support for this program. As noted in the section above regarding technical comments, estuarine and marine water quality problems are often the result of cumulative impacts removed from the coast. Upstream restoration investments can be needed to address coastal, estuarine, and marine environmental problems. As discussed in the [activity description](#) for this program, the goal of this activity is to provide downstream ecological benefits through upstream forest restoration.

Freshwater inflows from upland forests in coastal watersheds are critical elements that structure physical, biogeochemical, and hydrologic conditions in near-shore coastal systems, and thus the biological communities that inhabit them. Timing, quantity, and quality of freshwater flows from forests change salinity and total suspended solid levels, which directly impact riverine and estuarine productivity, and the distribution and lifecycles of species that rely upon these habitats. Regional ecosystem health, function, and services can be improved by increasing freshwater availability through improved resource management. Specifically, the goal is to increase water recharge by reducing forest biomass and thus, evapotranspiration via targeted forest management implemented on high priority sites. Forest biomass reduction through silvicultural management practices (e.g., selective thinning) have been shown to increase streamflow, and reduce ecosystem water use.

Restoration activities in *Enhancing Gulf Waters Through Forested Watershed Restoration* will include new, proven social marketing techniques to effectively reach landowners, implementation of best management practices (e.g., establishing forests, prescribed fire, and controlling invasive exotic species), and use of science-based decision support tools to inform forest restoration investments and quantify long-term outcomes. Anticipated results include improvements to water quality and quantity, and wildlife habitat through professional forest management, avoided land use conversion, and increased forest cover. The *Enhancing Gulf Waters Through Forested Watershed Restoration* program will improve and maintain healthy ecosystem services including water storage and filtration in upland forests, wetlands, and coastal ecosystems throughout the Gulf Region in Florida, Alabama, and Mississippi.

## **Gulf of Mexico Coast Conservation Corps Program**

**Comment:** One commenter asked whether the *Gulf of Mexico Coast Conservation Corps (GulfCorps) Program* is based upon an existing program or is new, and whether there is an educational partner (e.g., a community college).

**Response:** The *Gulf of Mexico Coast Conservation Corps (GulfCorps) Program*, as proposed in FPL 3b, would continue the work underway through funding from the [2015 Initial FPL](#). While the program does not formally partner with educational organizations, it does provide training to its participants. A significant focus of the program is professional development. This includes training for skills such as things like interviewing, resume writing, self-branding, communication, and goal-setting. Other trainings focus on habitat restoration fieldwork and include chainsaw use, prescribed fire certification, monitoring techniques, GPS use, and general construction. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has also worked to leverage educational opportunities for GulfCorps participants through NOAA's Center for Coastal and Marine Ecosystems (CCME) funded by the NOAA Educational Partnership Program with Minority Serving Institutions (EPP/MSI). This has resulted in Florida A&M University offering scholarships to GulfCorps alumni if they are accepted into an environmental program at the institution. Some GulfCorps partners/crews work independently to provide members with additional educational opportunities including GED support and scholarships.

**Comment:** Many commenters expressed support for the GulfCorps program, including letters from citizens, governmental and non-governmental organizations who worked with the GulfCorps crews, and previous program participants.

Many commenters noted that this program supports volunteer-based organizations, municipalities, and other governmental organizations with limited resources to complete many projects that would otherwise be cost-prohibitive. GulfCorps crews are able to partner with organizations, providing expertise and crews to complete projects requiring physically-demanding manual labor that improve green spaces. Others acknowledged the success of this program in making meaningful contributions to habitat restoration while teaching disadvantaged and minority young adults skills that prepare them for long term employment in conservation and related fields. One commenter noted that, by continuing to support this program, the Council is, "...investing in the sustainable improvement of our region by investing in our young people."

Past participants provided detailed information regarding their roles and responsibilities, as well as the lasting benefits the program had on their careers. In addition to the quantified environmental benefits of the program, participants described the marketable technical and "soft" skills they have learned, the opportunity to earn industry certifications, professional networking and relationship-building opportunities, benefits provided to at-risk and underserved youth, and cultivation of environmental awareness within communities. One past participant noted that the GulfCorps program creates, "...green citizens who will plant seeds of environmental conservation in whatever soil is beneath their feet."



**Response:** The Council thanks all commenters who took the time to provide letters of support for this program, including describing in detail the benefits of the program generally, as well as benefits to individual past participants. The Council looks forward to continuing this work in FLP 3b that benefits both the environment and young adults who are the future work force for this important work.

**Comment:** One commenter expressed concerns about the GulfCorps program, indicating that coastal habitat restoration is relatively technical work, requiring considerable training. This commenter indicated that participants would not learn much of value because, in the commenter's estimation, most of the work to restore coastal habitats involves large scale construction activity rather than manual labor.

**Response:** The Council acknowledges and agrees that much of the work to restore coastal habitats is large-scale and complex, requiring engineering and scientific professionals to design and build. However, there is a great deal of work to restore and manage conserved habitats that requires more manual labor. This labor, although manual, often requires specialized training and certifications to conduct. Through this program, the Council seeks to enhance the environmental vitality of the area's natural resources while also building the local coastal restoration workforce and giving young adults the skills and experience needed to find jobs in this field. The GulfCorps program is designed to train individuals to do work including, but not limited to: removing invasive species and planting native species (often requiring chainsaw and prescribed burn certifications), repairing trails and boardwalks that minimize foot traffic into sensitive habitats, and storm debris removal. As of June 2020, the GulfCorps program has implemented more than 68 projects, benefitting over 10,000 acres of habitat, including over 5,500 acres of upland conservation, 1,800 acres of invasive species treated, and 2,198 acres of marsh and beach enhancement.

In addition to the ecosystem restoration accomplishments, this program has proven successful in providing young adults with skills needed to become gainfully employed after their time with the GulfCorps program. In the first three years of the program, 225 members met the program's objectives of attending the GulfCorps training: completing one project skill, one soft/professional development skill, and one certification training; and completing 320 hours of work. In 2019, the GulfCorps program had a 94% job placement rate of the 80 participants who met objectives whose post-service plans were known, or a 76% placement rate assuming the unknowns did not secure employment. Many participants were placed into positions with research laboratories and governmental organizations; others were inspired to pursue post-graduate degrees. If you would like more information regarding the benefits of this program please contact the Council at [RestoreCouncil@RestoreTheGulf.gov](mailto:RestoreCouncil@RestoreTheGulf.gov).

## Tribal Youth Coastal Restoration Program

**Comment:** Several commenters expressed support for the *Tribal Youth Coastal Restoration (Tribal Youth) Program*.

**Response:** The Council appreciates the public's support for the *Tribal Youth Coastal Restoration (Tribal Youth) Program*, including recognition of the importance of the program in supporting underserved communities in addition to the environmental benefits of the work. The Council looks forward to continuing this work that benefits both the environment and Tribal high school students who are the future work force for this important work.

**Comment:** One commenter asked whether FPL 3b includes funding for the Indian Tribal program, recognizing that in the past, funds were provided to the Poarch Band of Creek Indian tribe through the Department of the Interior.

**Response:** The Tribal Youth program is in FPL 3b and includes funds to support Poarch Band of Creek Indian tribal projects. More details regarding this program may be found in the [activity description](#) for this program.

**Comment:** One commenter stated that they would like to see this program expanded beyond Federally recognized tribes, noting that many indigenous people in the Gulf region are not Federally recognized.

**Response:** The Council recognizes that there are many indigenous youth in the Gulf who are not from Federally recognized tribes. As a federal agency, the U.S. Department of the Interior works with Federally recognized tribes in adherence with Nation-to-Nation policies. This particular program is not designed to more broadly reach other underserved communities, including other indigenous populations. The Council encourages individuals who might be interested in environmental restoration training opportunities to inquire about the Council's GulfCorps program. If you would like more information regarding this program please contact the Council at [RestoreCouncil@RestoreTheGulf.gov](mailto:RestoreCouncil@RestoreTheGulf.gov).