



**Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council  
Equity Action Plan  
January 19, 2022**

**Executive Summary**

This Equity Action Plan has been prepared by the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (Council) pursuant to Executive Order 13985, “Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government, January 20, 2021” (EO). This plan was approved by the Council on January 19, 2022, and is based on collaborative guidance and input from federal and state Council members.

In response to the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill, the *Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities, and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States Act of 2012* (33 U.S.C. § 1321(t) and *note*) (RESTORE Act) was signed into law in July 2012. The RESTORE Act established the Council, which is composed of the governors of the States of Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas, the Secretaries of the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, the Army, Commerce, Homeland Security and the Interior, and the Administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Pursuant to the RESTORE Act, the Council is responsible for administering over \$3.2 billion in civil and administrative penalties paid by responsible parties in connection with the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill. The RESTORE Act authorizes specific uses for the funds administered by the Council, which are divided equally into two allocations. One allocation is used for Gulf ecosystem restoration and protection activities identified by the Council. The other is used for Gulf ecosystem restoration and protection activities identified by designated Gulf state member entities, subject to approval by the Council Chair. Up to 25% of this second allocation can be used for infrastructure projects. Additional information on the Council can be found in the [Council’s 2016 Comprehensive Plan](#).

Under the RESTORE Act only the eleven members can receive funding from the Council (including a consortium of Florida counties bordering the Gulf of Mexico). The Council expends funds for member-led activities to implement a comprehensive ecosystem restoration plan, developed by the Council in accordance with criteria in the RESTORE Act. Projects and programs in the first allocation referenced above are selected by the Council through an affirmative vote of at least three states and the federal chair. Projects and programs in the second allocation are selected and developed by the state members and funded through a statutorily-determined formula. In both

allocations, the primary authority and responsibility for overseeing and implementing approved projects and programs rests with the individual Council members sponsoring them.

The following Equity Action Plan summarizes Council activities initiated prior to the EO which align with and support the overall intent of the EO. The Equity Action Plan then sets forth specific actions the Council will take to advance the EO. These actions are grouped in two categories: public engagement and data analysis. Actions in the first group may help advance more inclusive public engagement with Council activities. Actions in the second group are intended to identify existing data and analytical tools that may help inform the Council with respect to how its investments relate to equity.

### **Summary of Early Accomplishments**

In response to the EO, the Council reviewed its existing policies and programs as they relate to equity, and identified additional actions that could be taken in support of the EO. The Council's August 2021 Equity Assessment provides the findings of this review along with the proposed additional actions. The actions identified in the Equity Assessment build on and enhance the Council's ongoing policies and programs that align with the EO. These ongoing activities are based on the Council's commitment to engagement, inclusion and transparency, and include:

- Addressing language barriers for communities impacted by the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill;
- Providing live and recorded American Sign Language translation of stakeholder engagement;
- Funding environmental job training (including tribal youth and youth from other underserved communities);
- Broadening funding eligibility to projects benefiting federally-recognized Tribes;
- Investing in economically disadvantaged areas; and
- Providing individualized and targeted outreach to specific underserved communities and areas.

### **Equity Action Plan**

Pursuant to the EO, the Council has identified two focus areas, public engagement and data analysis, and associated action items, that build on the ongoing activities discussed above. Descriptions of these action items are provided below, along with a brief discussion of the barriers and/or opportunities they seek to address.

**Public Engagement:** Broad and inclusive public input helps ensure that the Council selects the most effective ecosystem restoration projects and programs. The Council seeks to conduct public engagement activities that reach and serve an array of communities, including under-represented communities and stakeholders across the Gulf. To do this the Council must address varied challenges, including those associated with language barriers and the ability of stakeholders to participate in public meetings. To that end, the Council is committed to the following actions:

- Providing Spanish translations of major Council documents in addition to the ongoing

Vietnamese translations. The Council will consider translating any other Council document into Spanish, Vietnamese and/or other languages upon request.

- Providing enhanced virtual access for recorded public webinars on the Council’s website. To facilitate access by non-English speakers, the Council will provide Vietnamese and Spanish subtitles for recorded webinars and translated documents for public meetings. Building on the current Council practice of Vietnamese translations and webinars, this action will be expanded to include Spanish translations in 2022.
- Developing and updating a list of publications and media outlets that serve or otherwise reach underserved communities. The list may be used, for example, to inform such communities of public comment opportunities offered by the Council and its members. The list was compiled in 2021 and will be updated periodically thereafter.

The Council remains open to considering other ways to enhance engagement with underserved stakeholders.

**Data Analysis:** There is an opportunity for the Council to better understand the relationship between its ecosystem investments and equity. To that end, the Council is exploring ways to advance the use of data to help the Council further address the EO. Specifically, the Council commits to the following actions:

- Examining its own data on projects and programs, as well as other relevant publicly available data, to determine what information could be used to help assess the Council's ecosystem restoration and protection investments in relation to equity considerations.
- Assessing the suitability of other available resources or tools that may be used to help understand equity-related aspects of the Council’s work. For example, one tool the Council will examine is EJSCREEN, a mapping and screening tool created by the EPA that combines and displays environmental and demographic information for an area, including environmental justice indicators.
- As feasible, utilizing data and resources identified through the processes described above to support the development and implementation of analytical approaches (such as spatial analyses) that may help the Council and its members better understand equity as it relates to its investments. The Council will make the data and analyses available to its members, which may help inform member outreach and other activities.

The Council initiated work on the data analysis actions in 2021, and intends to complete its initial review of existing data and analytical tools in 2022. Upon completion of this initial review, the Council will consider what additional actions it might take in support of this effort. Finally, as with the public engagement focus area, the Council remains open to considering other ways that

data and associated resources can be used to support the Council's efforts to implement the EO.

### **Tracking Progress and Accountability**

In general, the Council tracks progress and ensures accountability with respect to its goals and objectives through interagency coordination and collaboration among the Council members. The Council members routinely meet to review and discuss all aspects of the Council's work, including funding decisions, financial policies, scientific and technical considerations, public input, and federal policy such as the EO. The diverse expertise and perspectives offered by the Council members facilitate these reviews.

The Council is using this same interagency approach for both the development and implementation of this Equity Action Plan. The Council members will periodically review progress toward the action items listed in this plan and, as appropriate, will recommend additional actions and/or adjustments to the existing activities in order to meet the associated equity objectives.

As discussed, in addition to its interagency processes the Council provides opportunities for the public to review and comment on matters ranging from individual funding decisions to high-level planning and policy documents such as the Council's Comprehensive Plan. These public engagement initiatives provide transparency, and the Council will continue to review and revise them as necessary to enhance the effectiveness and reach of this critical aspect of the Council's work.