

Category 1:**Activity:** Gulf of Mexico Conservation Enhancement Grant Program (Implementation)**Unique Identifier:** MS_RESTORE_001_005_Cat1**Location:** Gulf-wide**Type of Activity:** Implementation**FPL Category:** 1 – Funding Approved**Cost Estimate:** \$2,500,000 (includes \$375,000 originally approved for GMCEGP planning)**Responsible Council Member:** Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)**Partnering Council Member(s):** ALL**Originally submitted by:** The State of Mississippi as a component within the proposal “Strategic Land Protection, Conservation, and Enhancement of Priority Gulf Coast Landscapes”

Executive Summary: As described in the proposal entitled MS Proposal for Strategic Land Protection, Conservation, and Enhancement of Priority Gulf Coast Landscapes, Objective 1- Action 2, EPA will develop and implement the Gulf of Mexico Conservation Enhancement Grant Program (GMCEGP), a funding assistance opportunity to enhance private/public partnerships that support land protection and conservation across the Gulf Coast region. This program will be available to land conservation organizations such as land trusts, non- governmental organizations (NGOs), and state land preservation agencies across the Gulf of Mexico region.

The GMCEGP implementation activity includes confirming all necessary environmental and regulatory compliance and clearance documentation has been provided by the selected awardee(s) in close coordination with the RESTORE Council, executing funding agreements with awardees, and documenting the required 1:1 match.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION: This project consists of the following.

The GMCEGP will make RESTORE funds available to enhance private/public partnerships that support land protection and conservation across the Gulf Coast. This program will be aimed at land conservation organizations such as land trusts, NGOs, and state land preservation agencies across the Gulf region. This Grants Program will have several objectives:

- Enhance land protection and conservation in priority landscapes of the Gulf;
- Improve habitats and water quality across the Gulf; and
- Enhance the understandings of the benefit of land protection to communities through focused outreach and education supporting conservation and stewardship.

This grants program will be administered through the EPA-Gulf of Mexico Program Office. The program will: 1) occur within the statutory geographic scope as articulated by Treasury regulations; 2) have a single call for proposals and will not be operated on an annual cycle; 3) require a mandatory 1:1 cost share component of in-kind or leveraged funds; 4) strongly encourage coordinated efforts between land conservation groups and their respective resource management agencies to enhance leveraging opportunities; and 5) fund projects that are

foundational and sustainable to habitat protection and conservation and water quality improvement for the Gulf of Mexico.

Implementation funding of the GMCEGP can be used to assist land conservation organizations to conduct necessary due diligence and conservation baseline assessments; restore or enhance previously preserved conservation lands (e.g. invasive species removal, hydrologic restoration); conduct regional assessments of conservation effectiveness; conduct economic evaluation of land conservation and restoration; and/or conduct economic evaluation of ecological services provided by the restored conservation land.

On December 7, 2017, EPA issued a request for proposals for GMCEGP funding. After reviewing all proposals received, EPA selected eight projects for GMCEGP funding. The sponsors of these eight projects are listed below. EPA will provide subawards to these organizations to fund implementation of the associated projects.

- **St. Tammany Parish Government:** Vegetative planting of Tenet Pond for habitat enhancement, Louisiana.
- **Atlanta Botanical Garden:** Enhance conservation through woody vegetation removal and evaluation of novel management in Florida's rare coastal wetlands ecosystem.
- **Land Trust for the Mississippi Coastal Plain:** Gulf Coast land conservation project assistance, Gulfwide.
- **Woodlands Conservancy:** Restoration and enhancement of habitat for resident and migratory birds in the Barataria Basin, Louisiana.
- **Mississippi Forestry Commission:** Enhancing and rehabilitating the ecological function in a major watershed and subwatershed in the Mississippi Gulf Coast region.
- **The Nature Conservancy:** Calcasieu Lake and Sabine National Wildlife Refuge oyster reef restoration project, Louisiana.
- **Galveston Bay Foundation:** Galveston Bay Conservation Program - enhancing preserved lands, supporting land acquisition, and understanding conservation benefits, Texas.
- **Ducks Unlimited, Inc.:** Texas Coastal Prairies Program - wetland conservation for wildlife and people.

Specific Actions/Activities: Specific actions and activities of the implementation activity of the GMCEGP include:

- Confirming all necessary environmental and regulatory compliance and clearance documentation;
- Executing funding agreements with awardees;
- Documenting required 1:1 match;
- Monitor selected projects to ensure necessary environmental and regulatory compliance and clearances; and
- Monitor selected projects to ensure timely initiation and completion of the scope of work for which funds were awarded.

Deliverables: Specific deliverables of the implementation activity of the GMCEGP include:

- Documentation of all necessary environmental and regulatory compliance and clearances for individual selected projects;
- Executed funding agreements for individual selected projects;
- Documentation of required 1:1 match for individual selected projects;
- Project progress and financial reports;
- Final progress and financial reports for individual projects; and
- Summary Report of the GMCEGP.

Ecological Benefits/Outcomes and Metrics: Ecological Benefits/Outcomes derived from projects and programs funded by the GMCEGP will focus on conservation of habitat; enhancing land protection and conservation in priority landscapes; improving habitats and water quality on conserved lands; enhancing the understandings of the benefit of land protection to communities through focused outreach and education supporting conservation and stewardship; developing and implementing conservation management plans; protecting critical aquatic habitat; restoring and managing critical aquatic shoreline and upland habitat utilizing hydrologic, landscape, vegetation and wildlife management actions; and implementing other water quality and habitat restoration techniques. Metrics will likely include, but not be limited to: acres restored/protected; linear feet of shoreline restored/protected; acres of upland habitat restored/protected; and acres restored/protected from invasive species.

Leveraging and Co-Funding:

- **Co-funding:** The funding opportunity will require the recipients to match the awarded funds at a 1:1 ratio.

Duration of Activity: Estimated project duration, period of time during which the funds will be expended and the project scope of work is completed, will be 1-3 years from funds award date.

Life of Activity: N/A for awardee(s) whose scope of work focuses on implementing planning efforts to enhance their land protection and conservation efforts. Varies for awardee(s) whose scope of work focuses on implementing improvement and restoration programs on conserved lands. Estimated life of 10-30+ years for implemented improvements and restoration efforts on conserved lands.

RESPONSE TO SCIENCE REVIEWS:

Most of the science reviews associated with the MS Proposal for Strategic Land Protection, Conservation, and Enhancement of Priority Gulf Coast Landscapes focused on the planning and prioritization of acquisition activities and are addressed in other related activities. It is our understanding that there were no science comments associated with this component of the MS proposal for a GMCEGP to be administered through the EPA Gulf of Mexico Program for

enhancing private/public partnerships that support land protection and conservation efforts across the Gulf region.

ENVIRONMENTAL COMPLIANCE:

Prior to approving implementation funds for a project, the Council must comply with all applicable environmental laws, including the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Section 4(h) of the Council's NEPA Procedures provides:

“(h) Actions Exempt from the Requirements of NEPA. Certain Council Actions may be covered by a statutory exemption under existing law. The Council will document its use of such an exemption pursuant to applicable requirements.”

In accordance with the above provision, the Council is relying upon EPA's statutory NEPA exemption for the approval of implementation funding for the eight GMCEGP projects. EPA has provided the Council with documentation confirming that the above mentioned eight projects fall within EPA's statutory NEPA exemption. This documentation also contains information demonstrating compliance with other applicable laws, including the Endangered Species Act, National Historic Preservation Act, and the Magnuson-Stevens Act. EPA will be required to adhere to all applicable terms and conditions contained in this documentation. The Council's reliance upon EPA's statutory NEPA exemption does not in any way alter the Council's or EPA's obligation to comply with other applicable laws.

The Council has reviewed the [environmental compliance documentation](#) provided by EPA and has found that it addresses all laws applicable to Council approval of funding under the Bucket 2.