

Proposed Funded Priorities List Amendment - Gulf of Mexico Conservation Enhancement Grant Program

The Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (Council) is allowing additional time for public comment on a proposed amendment of its 2015 Initial Funded Priorities List (2015 FPL) to approve implementation funding for the [Gulf of Mexico Conservation Enhancement Grant Program \(GMCEGP\)](#), which is sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Specifically, the Council is proposing to approve \$2.5M to support implementation of eight ecosystem conservation and enhancement projects identified by EPA as eligible for funding under the GMCEGP.

Background:

Pursuant to the RESTORE Act (33 U.S.C. §1321 (t)), the Council is responsible for administering portions of *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill settlement funds for the purpose of restoring the environment and economy of the Gulf coast. The Council administers two funding programs, one of which is the Council-Selected Restoration Component, or “Bucket 2.” Under Bucket 2, the Council votes to approve Gulf ecosystem restoration projects and programs proposed by the Council members. Bucket 2 projects and programs approved for funding by the Council are included in what is referred to as a Funded Priorities List (FPL).

In its Initial FPL, the Council approved \$375K in planning funds for the Gulf of Mexico Conservation Enhancement Grant Program (GCEGP). During this time, the Council also identified the implementation component of GMCEGP as a priority for potential funding, and budgeted approximately \$2.1M for possible use on this program. EPA, the sponsor of GMCEGP, is now seeking to amend the Initial FPL to approve approximately \$2.1M to implement GMCEGP. EPA has not used the \$375K in approved planning funds. In addition to seeking approval of the implementation funds, EPA is also requesting to amend the Initial FPL to reallocate the \$375K from planning to implementation. In summary, the proposed Initial FPL amendment would approve \$2.5M for implementation of the GMCEGP.

Under the GMCEGP, EPA proposes to make Bucket 2 funds available to enhance private/public partnerships that support land protection and conservation across the Gulf Coast. The GMCEGP is aimed at land conservation organizations such as land trusts, non-governmental organizations, and state land preservation agencies across the Gulf region. The GMCEGP has the following objectives:

- Enhance land protection and conservation in priority landscapes of the Gulf;
- Improve habitats and water quality across the Gulf; and

- Enhance the understanding of the benefit of land protection to communities through focused outreach and education supporting conservation and stewardship.

Applicants for the GMCEGP must provide a non-federal match of 50% of the total cost of the project. Proposals should also demonstrate coordinated efforts between land conservation groups and include projects that are foundational and sustainable to habitat protection and conservation and water quality improvement for the Gulf of Mexico.

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 along with a brief description of the activity to be funded under the GMCEGP:

- **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.

If the GMCEGP is approved by the Council for implementation funding, EPA will provide subawards to these organizations to fund implementation of the associated projects.

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 proposing to rely upon EPA's statutory NEPA exemption in association with 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 would 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.

To learn more about the RESTORE Council visit us at www.restorethegulf.gov or send questions to restorecouncil@restorethegulf.gov.