



Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council Initial Funded Priorities List: Lessons Learned and Path Forward Summary Report

In the spring of 2016, the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (Council) engaged in a “Lessons Learned and Path Forward” review of the process used to develop the Initial Funded Priorities List (FPL). The goal of the review was to engage a broad array of participants, including the general public, interested stakeholder groups, and Federally-recognized Tribal leaders to identify what worked and what could have been improved during the Initial FPL development process.

As part of this process, the Council hosted a series of webinars to solicit feedback from the public. A total of 229 stakeholders attended the three webinars (Table 1). On May 10, 2016, four Federally-recognized Tribes provided feedback during a Tribal Engagement Meeting in New Orleans.

Table 1. Lessons Learned and Path Forward Webinar Information

	Date	Time	Number of attendees
Webinar #1	April 12, 2016	2:00 - 3:30 pm (CST)	99
Webinar #2	April 14, 2016	5:30 – 7:00 pm (CST)	27
Webinar #3	April 28, 2016	12:00 – 1:30 pm (CST)	103

The webinar attendees represented a diverse group from across the Gulf. A breakdown of attendee affiliation by organization type is shown in Figure 1.

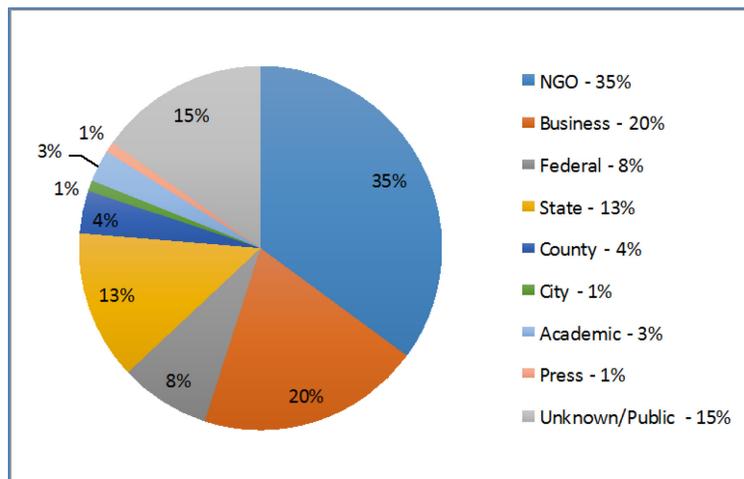


Figure 1. Webinar Attendee Affiliation by Organization Type.

During the webinars, the Council solicited feedback through polling and written comments. While the sizeable number of unique comments received cannot be fully captured here, all comments were carefully reviewed and considered by the Council. This Report provides a summary of the input received throughout this review. In addition to addressing issues pertinent to the Initial FPL development process, this review has provided the Council with valuable insights that will improve future FPL processes and will help inform the update of the Council’s Initial Comprehensive Plan.

FPL Development Process and Areas for Improvement

The majority of webinar participants felt that while the Council’s FPL development process was successful, minor adjustments to the process were needed (Figure 2). Participants noted that there were areas for improvement in project development and selection, in the application of best available science, and incorporating public input and transparency (Figure 3). Some participants were unclear how projects/programs were selected and others observed that additional opportunities for dialogue and engagement would improve the overall process.

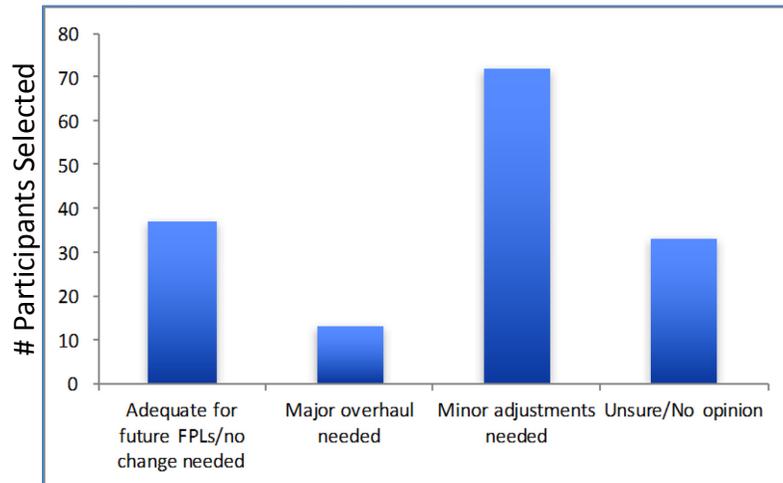


Figure 2. How would you characterize the Council’s FPL development process? (Select one)

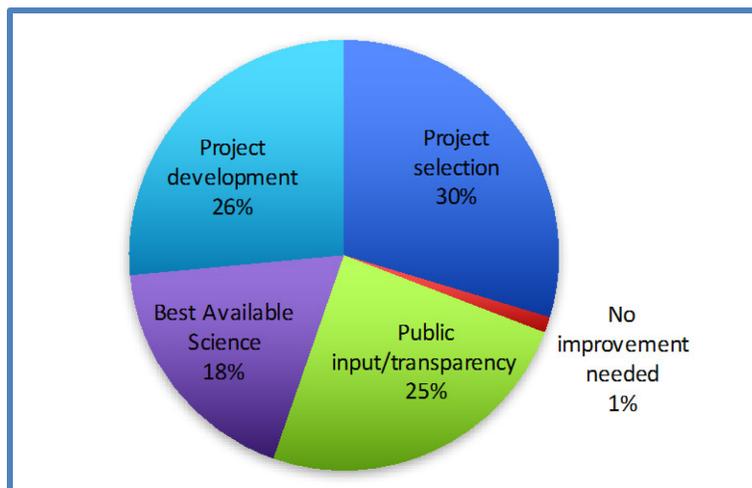


Figure 3. What are some areas where the FPL process could have been improved? (Select all that apply)

Participants suggested there are several factors Council members should consider during the proposal development process for the next FPL (Figure 4). Many highlighted their desire for the funding of large-scale restoration projects. Some suggested funding should go to the areas of greatest need, and toward projects that maximize long-term ecosystem benefits. Many participants suggested that Council members should collaborate on the development of future proposals.

Some participants noted that the existing Comprehensive Plan Objectives and Priority Criteria should be further developed and/or refined in order to drive project selection. Many participants stressed the importance of leveraging funding across restoration programs (e.g., Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) Trustee Council and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF)) to avoid duplication, standardize data collection and monitoring, and address Gulf-wide ecosystem needs.

In addition to the factors shown in Figure 4, some participants suggested that the Council should dedicate more funding for restoration and conservation on private lands. Others stressed the need for better outreach and engagement with minority communities while ensuring funding for workforce development and job training. A number of participants suggested the need for improved guidance and transparency during the early stages of project proposal development.

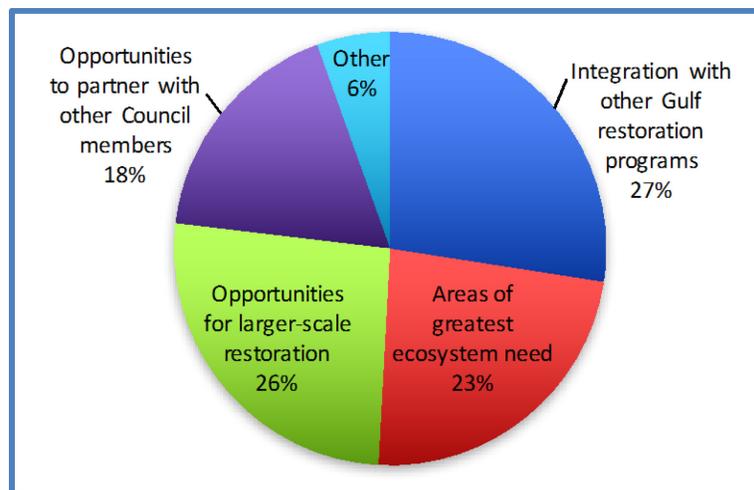


Figure 4. In the future, what factors should Council members consider as they develop proposals? (Please select all that apply)

Use of Watershed and Estuary-Based Approach

The use of a watershed/estuary-based approach for comprehensive ecological restoration was favored by the vast majority of participants (Figure 5). Many noted that linking projects to environmental stressors by watershed or estuary is scientifically sound and offers operational advantages. Some stakeholders suggested that the selection of priority watersheds should be based on a scientific analysis as well as on the importance of ecosystem benefits (e.g., economic and cultural resources) to the surrounding communities. Others felt that the use of a watershed/estuary-based approach is a good framework, but noted that there are features of the Gulf system that extend beyond coastal watershed boundaries, including private lands in upper watersheds, and marine and

offshore habitats. Many participants noted that the watershed/estuary-based approach should allow for regional projects that address similar issues across watersheds.

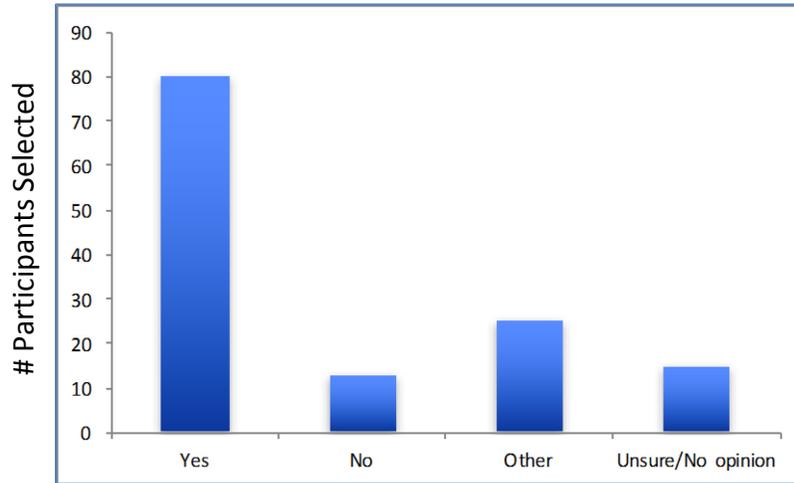


Figure 5. The Council used a watershed- and estuary-based approach for this FPL. Should the Council use this approach for future FPLs? (Select one)

Public Input During the FPL Development Process

While participants appreciated the Council’s efforts to be transparent and engage the public, many suggested that public engagement during the first FPL process could have been more robust (Figure 6). The majority of participants noted that the next FPL process should allow for additional opportunities for public review and comment (Figure 7). Many called for more public input during the project development stage, while others felt there was not sufficient time or process for the Council to respond to public comments on the draft FPL. Several participants expressed that it was not clear how the Council weighed or considered public comments in the final decisions for the Initial FPL and suggested that the Council provide a clearer framework for incorporating public comments for future FPLs.

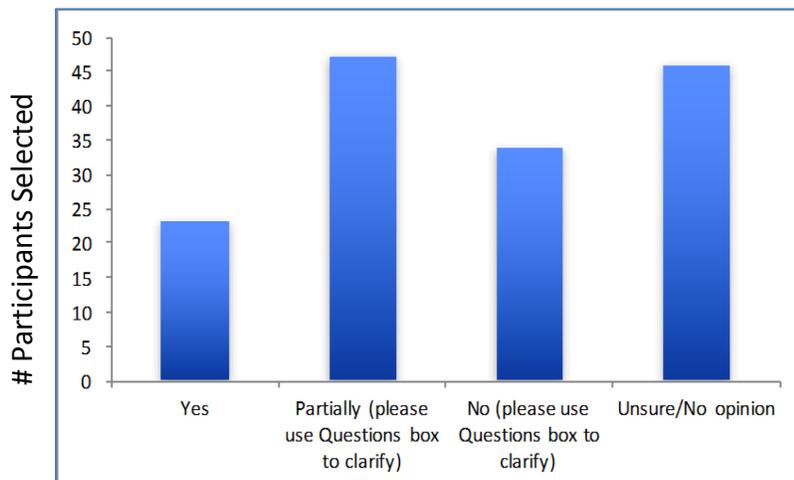


Figure 6. Was the process for involving the public in the FPL process effective? (Select one)

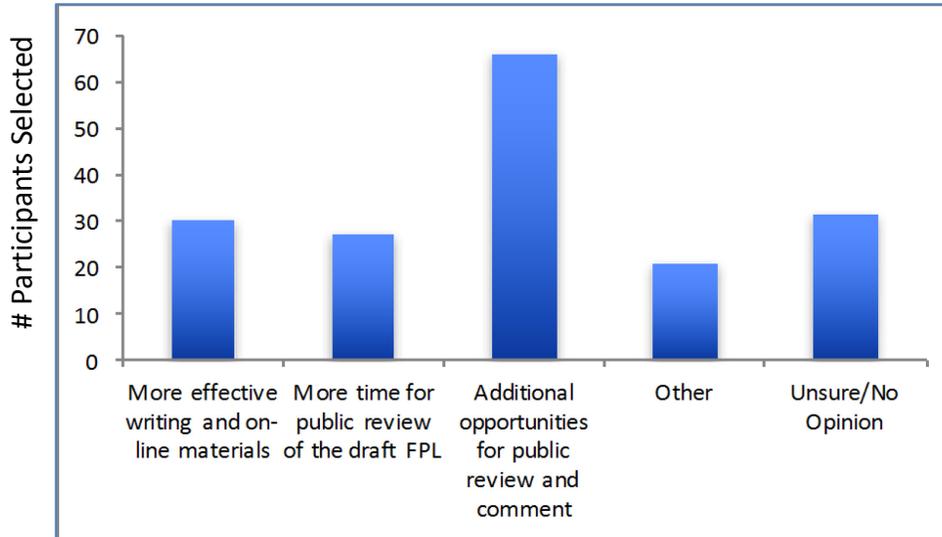


Figure 7. What other actions could have been taken to create a more open and transparent process? (Please select all that apply)

Best Available Science Review Process

The majority of participants suggested that the best available science (BAS) review approach used during the first FPL should be maintained, but that there is room for improvement (Figure 8). Many participants noted that the BAS review process could be refined by improving review evaluation questions, comparing science reviewer input through the use of an expert panel, and by scoring/ranking projects scientifically (Figure 9). Support was also expressed for a transparent and science-based method for cross-proposal review and identifying possible interactions leading to maximum ecosystem benefit. A number of participants suggested a more equitable distribution of social scientists in subsequent review processes.

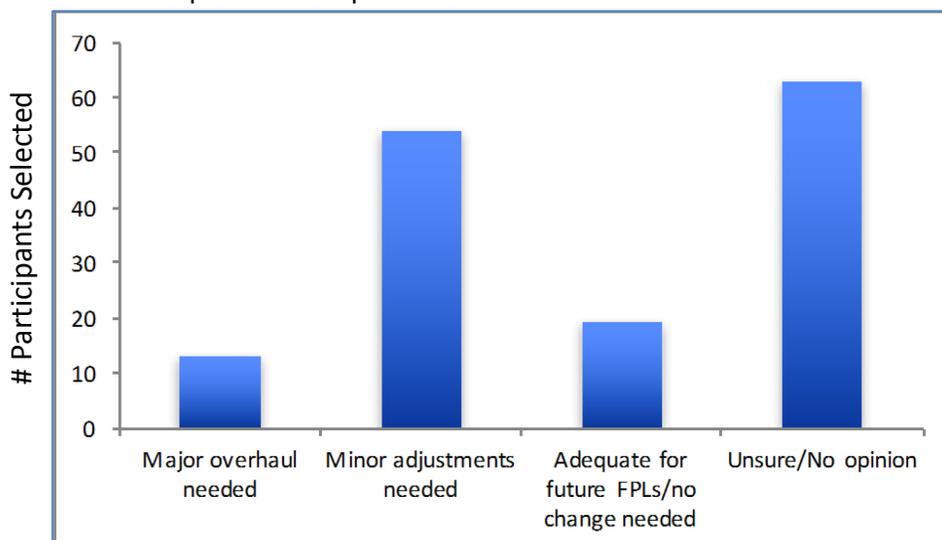


Figure 8. How would you characterize the Council's science review process? (Select one)

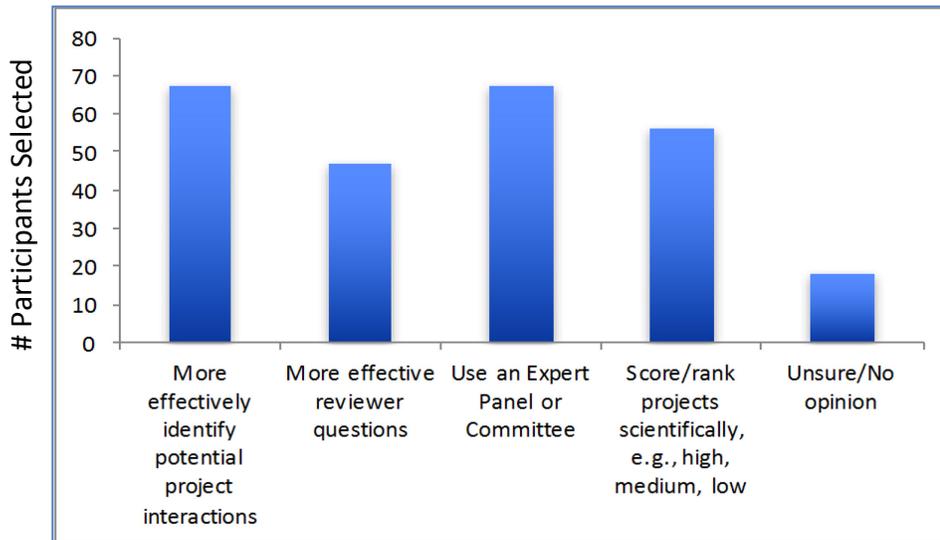


Figure 9. How could the process be improved? (Select all that apply)

Measuring Success

A number of participants noted that the Council should measure the success of funded projects at both the project level as well as at a larger scale (e.g., by watershed or region) (Figure 10). Some participants suggested that measures of success should be developed before project selection and the impact of projects on the community at large, in particular minority communities, must also be considered. Several participants highlighted the need for regional, long-term monitoring to measure comprehensive success, and requested ecosystem services be considered in the Council’s evaluation of projects/programs.

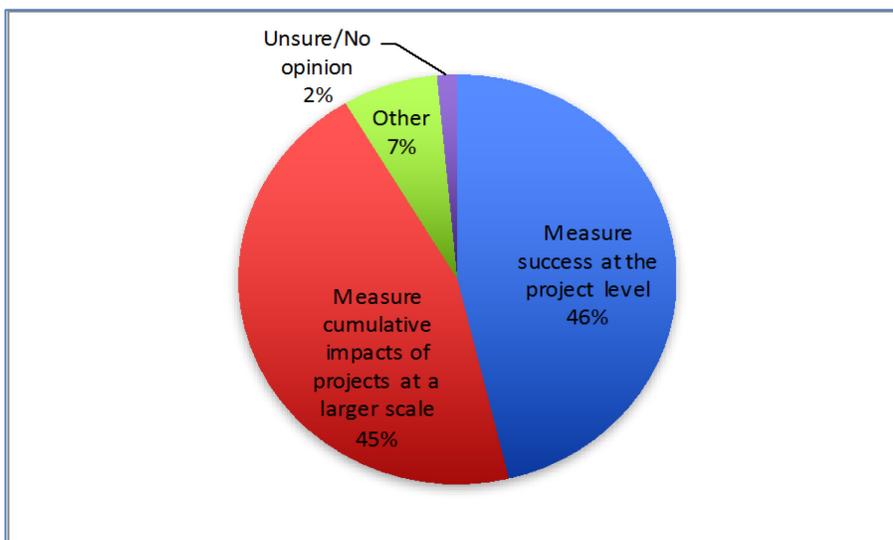


Figure 10. How should the Council show its work has been effective? (Please select all that apply)

General Comments/Questions

In addition to the feedback highlighted above, participants were invited to provide comments and questions on the overall FPL process and the Council's work toward comprehensive Gulf restoration. Many participants used this opportunity to offer comments regarding specific projects, regions and watersheds. Some called again for the funding of projects on private lands, while others highlighted a desire for more community outreach and education efforts within minority communities.

One comment heard consistently throughout the review process was that the Council's anticipated update to the Comprehensive Plan represents an important opportunity to ensure that insights and lessons learned from previous experience are appropriately captured.

Feedback on Webinar Format

Participants were very supportive of the use of the webinar format to solicit feedback on Council activities. Many participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to engage on a reflective look back at past Council actions. Several participants highlighted the importance of engaging as many communities as possible and noted that the webinar format is difficult to access for some disadvantaged populations. The majority of participants encouraged the Council to continue to use webinars to solicit public feedback.

Conclusion

The Council intends to play a key role in helping to ensure that the Gulf's natural resources are sustainable and available for future generations. Currently available Gulf restoration funds and those that may become available in the future represent a great responsibility. The ongoing involvement of the people who live, work and play in the Gulf region is critical to ensuring that these monies are used wisely and effectively. The Council thanks all who participated in the Lessons Learned and Path Forward webinars and Tribal Engagement Meeting. Your input has been essential throughout the past four years and will continue to be critical as the Council moves forward with its mission to restore the Gulf.