

**DRAFT
2022
COMPREHENSIVE PLAN
Update:**

*Restoring the Gulf Coast's Ecosystem and
Economy*



Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council

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Overview

The Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (RESTORE Council or Council) is seeking public comment on this draft *2022 Comprehensive Plan Update: Restoring the Gulf Coast's Ecosystem and Economy* (2022 Comprehensive Plan Update). This is the second update to the *2013 Initial Comprehensive Plan: Restoring the Gulf Coast's Ecosystem and Economy* ([2013 Initial Comprehensive Plan](#)). This 2022 Comprehensive Plan Update provides the public with updates to the strategic guidance that the Council established to effectively administer its roles and responsibilities. Additionally, it provides summary information regarding progress the Council has made to date on its goals, objectives, and commitments as outlined in the first update, *2016 Comprehensive Plan Update: Restoring the Gulf Coast's Ecosystem & Economy* ([2016 Comprehensive Plan Update](#)), including the effectiveness of its use of general planning funds in meeting those commitments. If approved by the Council, this draft 2022 Comprehensive Plan Update will supersede the 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update.

The Gulf Coast ecosystem is vital to our Nation and our economy, providing valuable energy resources, abundant seafood, extraordinary beaches and recreational activities, and a rich cultural heritage. Its waters and coasts are home to one of the most diverse environments in the world—including over 15,000 species of sea life. Much of this value is derived from the Gulf Coast environment and the many benefits it provides.

The environment of the Gulf Coast region was significantly injured by the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill, as well as from chronic and acute harm caused by other past and ongoing human actions. Restoring this large and complex region is a challenging and costly undertaking. Gulf habitats are continually degraded and lost due to development, infrastructure, sea-level rise, altered riverine processes, ocean acidification, salinity changes, and other human-caused factors. Water quality in the coastal and marine environments is degraded by upstream land uses (including both point and non-point discharges of pollutants) and hydrologic alterations spanning multiple states and involving the watersheds of large and small river systems alike. Stocks of marine and estuarine species are often depleted by over-utilization and conflicting resource use. Several of the region's environmental problems, such as wetland loss and hypoxia, span areas the size of some U.S. states. This degradation represents a serious risk to the cultural, social, and economic benefits derived from the Gulf ecosystem.

To add to these challenges, funding to restore and protect the Gulf ecosystem is distributed among a number of jurisdictions, entities, and programs, each with its own set of guidelines and decision processes. Inter-governmental coordination, engagement, and transparency are essential for ensuring that the available funding is used in the most effective and efficient way possible.

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The Council defines ecosystem restoration as:

“All activities, projects, methods, and procedures appropriate to enhance the health and resilience of the Gulf Coast ecosystem, as measured in terms of the physical, biological, or chemical properties of the ecosystem, or the services it provides, and to strengthen its ability to support the diverse economies, communities, and cultures of the region. It includes activity that initiates or accelerates the recovery of an ecosystem with respect to its health, integrity, and sustainability. It also includes protecting and conserving ecosystems so they can continue to reduce impacts from tropical storms and other disasters, support robust economies, and assist in mitigating and adapting to the impacts of climate change” (per Executive Order 13554).

The task of restoring the Gulf environment is a multi-generational undertaking. A comprehensive approach to Gulf restoration must include the engagement of a wide and diverse array of stakeholders, including federal, state, and local governments, Federally recognized Tribes, private businesses, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the general public. By working closely with our restoration partners, the Council is making significant progress towards comprehensive Gulf restoration and is providing substantial environmental and economic benefits to current and future generations.

As with previous Comprehensive Plans, this draft update does not identify specific ecosystem restoration activities; that is the purpose of Funded Priorities Lists (FPLs) and State Expenditure Plans (SEPs). The Council anticipates that future FPLs will continue to fund large-scale projects and programs that reflect the amounts available for restoration activities. Accordingly, this update is intended to continue to refine and guide Council decisions by:

- Ensuring consistency with the Priority Criteria referenced in the [RESTORE Act](#), described below
- Reinforcing the Council’s goals, objectives, and Comprehensive Plan commitments
- Recommitting to the Council’s Funding Strategy, including the Council’s vision for ecosystem restoration
- Continuing collaboration among Council members and partner ecosystem restoration and protection programs
- Ensuring that the Council’s decisions are informed by the best available science
- Communicating benefits of past funding decisions and describing how lessons learned from past actions inform future decisions
- Improving the efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency of Council actions

The RESTORE Act

Following the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill, on July 6, 2012, President Obama signed into law 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 or Act](#)). The Act called for a regional approach to restoring the long-term health of the valuable natural ecosystems and economy of the Gulf Coast region. The Act also established the RESTORE Council, composed of the Governors of Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas; the Secretaries of the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, the Interior, the Army, Commerce, and Homeland Security; and the Administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (Administrator). The Administrator is the current Council Chairperson.

Geographic Scope of the Gulf Coast Region Under the RESTORE Act

The RESTORE Act defines where and how its funds may be spent. The Act defines “Gulf Coast State” to mean any of the states of Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas, and includes the following areas within the “Gulf Coast region”:

- In the Gulf Coast States, the coastal zones (including federal lands within the coastal zones) that border the Gulf of Mexico;
- Any adjacent land, water, and watersheds within 25 miles of the coastal zones; and
- All federal waters in the Gulf of Mexico.

The U.S. Department of the Treasury regulations covering the RESTORE Act provide that an “*activity selected by the Council is carried out in the Gulf Coast Region when, in the reasonable judgement of the Council, each severable part of the activity is primarily designed to restore or protect that geographic area*” (31 CFR 34.202(a)).

RESTORE Funds

The RESTORE Act dedicates 80 percent of civil and administrative penalties paid under the Clean Water Act and arising from the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill to the Gulf Coast Restoration Trust Fund (Trust Fund) for expenditure under the RESTORE Act. This may include ecosystem restoration, economic recovery, and tourism promotion in the Gulf Coast region. This effort is in addition to the restoration of natural resources injured by the spill pursuant to a separate Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) under the *Oil Pollution Act*. A third and related Gulf restoration effort is being administered by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) using funds from the settlement of criminal charges against British Exploration and Production (BP) and Transocean Deepwater, Inc. (Transocean).

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In January 2013, Transocean and related entities entered into a consent decree with the United States under which the entities agreed to pay \$1B, plus interest, in civil penalties arising from the spill; pursuant to the Act, 80 percent of these funds, totaling \$816M, have been deposited into the Trust Fund. In November 2015, Anadarko Petroleum Corporation was found liable for \$159.5M in Clean Water Act penalties arising from the spill, and \$128M, including interest, has been deposited into the Trust Fund.

In April 2016, the United States and the five Gulf Coast States entered into a consent decree with BP (Consent Decree) settling all of their civil, administrative, and economic damage claims against BP arising from the spill (In re: Oil Spill ...). This settlement totaled more than \$20B from BP (Figure 1) and is the largest civil penalty ever paid by any defendant under any environmental statute, as well as the largest recovery of damages for injuries to natural resources. Under the Consent Decree \$5.5B of this amount was allocated to Clean Water Act penalties, of which 80 percent (\$4.4B plus interest) will be paid into the Trust Fund over a period of 15 years (Table 1).

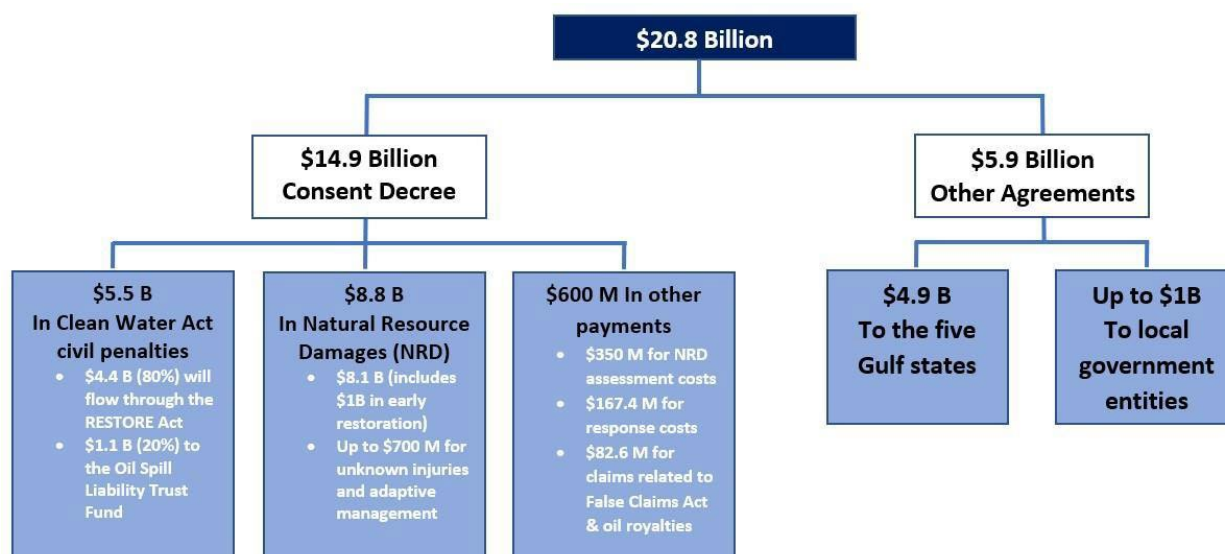


Figure 1. Allocation of settlement payments under the Consent Decree entered on April 4, 2016. Under the Consent Decree, over a fifteen-year period BP will pay a Clean Water Act civil penalty of \$5.5B, plus interest, 80 percent of which will go into the Trust Fund.

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YEAR	Council-Selected Restoration Component (\$M)	Spill Impact Component (\$M)
2011-2015	\$244.824	\$244.824
2016	\$38.329	\$38.329
2017	\$91.034	\$91.034
2018	\$45.517	\$45.517
2019	\$91.034	\$91.034
2020	\$91.034	\$91.034
2021	\$91.034	\$91.034
2022	\$91.034	\$91.034
2023	\$91.034	\$91.034
2024	\$91.034	\$91.034
2025	\$91.034	\$91.034
2026	\$91.034	\$91.034
2027	\$91.034	\$91.034
2028	\$91.034	\$91.034
2029	\$91.034	\$91.034
2030	\$91.034	\$91.034
2031	\$91.034	\$91.034
	\$1,603.146*	\$1,603.146

Table 1. Annual funds (\$ millions) available under the Council-Selected Restoration and Spill Impact Components. *Note: Amounts do not include future interest to be paid into/generated by the Trust Fund.*

The Council administers 60 percent of the funds in the Trust Fund (Figure 2). Under the Council-Selected Restoration Component, 30 percent, plus 50 percent of interest earned, is administered for Gulfwide ecosystem restoration and protection according to the Comprehensive Plan. The other 30 percent is allocated to the states under the Spill Impact Component according to a formula and regulation approved by the Council in December 2015. Each state has developed State Expenditure Plans (SEPs) which provide details of the projects

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and programs that will be implemented under the Spill Impact Component to contribute to the overall economic and ecological recovery of the Gulf. The SEPs must adhere to criteria set forth in the RESTORE Act and are subject to approval by the Council chair in accordance with those criteria. The remaining 40 percent of the funds in the Trust Fund are allocated as follows: 35 percent to a *Direct Component* which is divided equally among the five Gulf states for ecological and economic restoration; 2.5 percent to a *NOAA Science Component*, plus 25 percent of interest earned, dedicated to the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Science, Observation, Monitoring, and Technology Program; and 2.5 percent to a *Centers of Excellence Component*, plus 25 percent of interest earned, dedicated to the Centers of Excellence Research Grants Program.

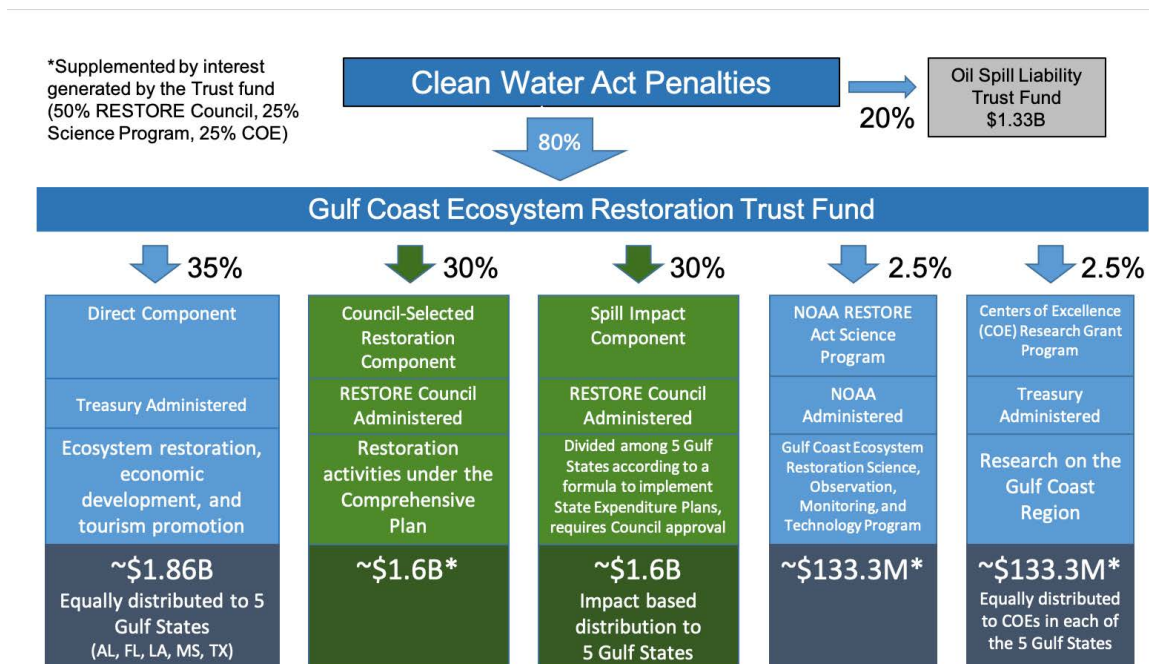


Figure 2. Allocation of the Gulf Coast Restoration Trust Fund based on settlements with BP, Transocean, and Anadarko.

Council Goals and Objectives

In developing the [2013 Initial Comprehensive Plan](#), the Council built on the strong foundation established in the *Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force Strategy* ([Task Force Strategy](#)) and other local, regional, state, and federal plans. Consistent with the [RESTORE Act](#), it adopted and expanded upon goals set forth in the Task Force Strategy. In developing the [2016 Comprehensive Plan Update](#), the Council recommitted to these goals, with one important clarifying amendment. Specifically, the Council included “water quantity” in the existing Goal 2 on water quality. Restoring water quality and habitat can, at times, require efforts to address water quantity issues. For example, restoring freshwater inflows to bays and estuaries is essential for restoring coastal waters and habitats by re-establishing natural salinity levels and sediment regimes. By referencing water quantity in the water quality goal, the Council made this connection more explicit. With this 2022 Comprehensive Plan Update, the Council recommits to these goals.

Council Goals

To provide the overarching framework for an integrated and coordinated approach for region-wide Gulf Coast restoration and to help guide the collective actions at the local, state, Tribal, and federal levels, the Council established the following five goals in the 2013 Initial Comprehensive Plan:

Goal 1: Restore and Conserve Habitat

Restore and conserve the health, diversity, and resilience of key coastal, estuarine, and marine habitats;

Goal 2: Restore Water Quality and Quantity

Restore and protect the water quality and quantity of the Gulf Coast region’s fresh, estuarine, and marine waters;

Goal 3: Replenish and Protect Living Coastal and Marine Resources

Restore and protect healthy, diverse, and sustainable living coastal and marine resources;

Goal 4: Enhance Community Resilience

Build upon and sustain communities with capacity to adapt to short- and long-term changes; and

Goal 5: Restore and Revitalize the Gulf Economy

Enhance the sustainability and resiliency of the Gulf economy.

The fifth goal focuses on reviving and supporting a sustainable Gulf economy to ensure that those expenditures by the Gulf Coast States authorized in the [RESTORE Act](#) under the Direct Component (administered by the U.S. Department of the Treasury) and the Spill Impact Component can be considered in the context of comprehensive restoration. The fifth goal also reflects the understanding that a strong economy is based on a healthy environment. Although the RESTORE Act does not apply Goal 5 to the Council-Selected Restoration Component, the Council acknowledges that, by investing in ecosystem restoration projects, the Council is helping maintain the environmental and economic foundation for Gulf coastal communities. In addition to the many economic benefits that are derived from the coastal environment, the implementation of restoration projects and programs also creates jobs locally and across the Gulf, both directly in the form of restoration-related jobs and indirectly as a result of a healthier and more productive ecosystem.

To achieve all five goals, the Council supports ecosystem restoration that can enhance local communities by giving people desirable places to live, work, and play, while creating opportunities for new and existing businesses of all sizes, especially those dependent on natural resources. In addition, the Council continues to support ecosystem restoration that builds local workforce capacity.

Council Objectives

In the [2016 Comprehensive Plan Update](#), the Council recommitted to the seven objectives that were included in the [2013 Initial Comprehensive Plan](#). The Council has applied these objectives to both the Council-Selected Restoration Component and the Spill Impact Component. As with the goals, the Council believes these objectives continue to represent the appropriate way to focus future Council funding decisions. The Council recommits to the following objectives:

Objective 1: Restore, Enhance, and Protect Habitats

Restore, enhance, and protect the extent, functionality, resiliency, and sustainability of coastal, freshwater, estuarine, wildlife, and marine habitats. These include barrier islands, beaches, dunes, coastal wetlands, coastal forests, pine savannas, coastal prairies, submerged aquatic vegetation, oyster reefs, and shallow and deepwater corals.

Objective 2: Restore, Improve, and Protect Water Resources

Restore, improve, and protect the Gulf Coast region's fresh, estuarine, and marine water resources by reducing or treating nutrient and pollutant loading; and improving the management of freshwater flows, discharges to, and withdrawals from critical systems.

Objective 3: Protect and Restore Living Coastal and Marine Resources

Restore and protect healthy, diverse, and sustainable living coastal and marine resources including finfish, shellfish, birds, mammals, reptiles, coral, and deep benthic communities.

Objective 4: Restore and Enhance Natural Processes and Shorelines

Restore and enhance ecosystem resilience, sustainability, and natural defenses through the restoration of natural coastal, estuarine, and riverine processes, and/or the restoration of natural shorelines.

Objective 5: Promote Community Resilience

Build and sustain Gulf Coast communities' capacity to adapt to short- and long-term natural and man-made hazards, particularly increased flood risks associated with sea-level rise and environmental stressors. Promote ecosystem restoration that enhances community resilience through the re-establishment of non-structural, natural buffers against storms and flooding.

Objective 6: Promote Natural Resource Stewardship and Environmental Education

Promote and enhance natural resource stewardship efforts that include formal and informal educational opportunities, professional development and training, communication, and other actions for all ages.

Objective 7: Improve Science-Based Decision-Making Processes

Improve science-based decision-making processes used by the Council.

Council-Selected Restoration Component

The Council-Selected Restoration Component is focused on ecosystem restoration in the Gulf Coast region, consistent with its established goals and objectives and the RESTORE Act Priority Criteria.

Funded Priorities Lists

The Funded Priorities List (FPL) is the vehicle through which funds are approved by the Council for specific ecosystem restoration activities. To date, the Council has approved three FPLs (the latter of which was developed in two phases) (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Timeline of Funded Priorities Lists (FPLs) approved by the Council.

The Council approved its first FPL, the *Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities, and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States Act Initial Funded Priorities List*, in December 2015 ([2015 Initial FPL](#)). A subsequent review of the process used to develop the 2015 Initial FPL included input from both Council members and the public. Following completion of this review, the Council developed the [2016 Comprehensive Plan Update](#). The 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update further emphasized the Council's commitments to collaborate among members, potential funding partners, and the public; increase public engagement and transparency; and refine its best available science (BAS) practices.

To advance these commitments, the Council approved a second FPL in January 2018, referred to as the *2017 Commitment and Planning Support Funded Priorities List* ([2017 CPS FPL](#)). Rather than funding specific restoration projects or programs, the 2017 CPS FPL dedicated funds over a five-year period to help Council members meet 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update commitments and identify potential areas for future FPL proposal development.

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Through this collaborative process, the Council recognized that developing *2020-21 Funded Priorities List 3* (referred to as [2020-21 FPL 3 or 2020-21 FPLs 3a and 3b](#)) in two phases would enable the Council to fund projects requiring near-term attention as well as take advantage of important partnership opportunities to advance large-scale ecosystem restoration. The first phase, *2020 Funded Priorities List 3a* ([2020 FPL 3a](#)), was approved by the Council in February 2020. The second phase, *2021 Funded Priorities List 3b* ([2021 FPL 3b](#)), was approved in April 2021.

Decision-Making Processes for the Council-Selected Component

The process the Council follows to develop FPLs is designed and periodically updated to ensure that all applicable laws and policies are adhered to in the selection of ecosystem restoration projects and programs. The Council's [2013 Initial Comprehensive Plan](#) outlined a process to guide the development, evaluation, and selection of Council-Selected Restoration Component activities to ensure consistency with the Priority Criteria set forth in the [RESTORE Act](#) as well as the Council's goals and objectives. In the [2016 Comprehensive Plan Update](#), the Council reaffirmed and retained key elements of this process while supplementing it with guidance based on lessons learned over its first three years of operation.

Priority Criteria

The Council continues to methodically adapt its processes to improve upon how it follows the RESTORE Act directives to use the best available science and to give highest priority to ecosystem projects and programs that meet one or more of the Act's four Priority Criteria listed below.

- Projects that are projected to make the greatest contribution to restoring and protecting the natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches, and coastal wetlands of the Gulf Coast region, without regard to geographic location within the Gulf Coast region.
- Large-scale projects and programs that are projected to substantially contribute to restoring and protecting the natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches, and coastal wetlands of the Gulf Coast ecosystem.
- Projects contained in existing Gulf Coast State comprehensive plans for the restoration and protection of natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches, and coastal wetlands of the Gulf Coast region.

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- Projects that restore long-term resiliency of the natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches, and coastal wetlands most impacted by the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill.

The Council will continue to use the goals, objectives, and Priority Criteria to guide its ecosystem restoration funding decisions.

Activity, Project, and Program Definitions

In reviewing the [2015 Initial FPL](#) process, the Council identified a need for clearer definitions of the terms “project” and “program.” Refining these terms has helped ensure consistency among members’ proposals, simplified the planning and evaluation process, and facilitated compliance with applicable environmental laws. In addition, the 2013 Initial Comprehensive Plan did not provide a definition for “activity”—a term that was used extensively in the 2015 Initial FPL. These refined and additional definitions are provided below.

- **Activity:** A general term that includes both projects and programs, and may also be used to describe components of a project or program. All the projects and programs included in the Council’s FPLs could be referred to collectively as restoration “activities.”
- **Project:** A single ecosystem restoration and/or conservation activity that cannot be separated into stand-alone sub-activities. A project may be “scalable,” meaning that its scope, size, and/or cost can be expanded or reduced as needed and appropriate. A project can be separated into a “planning” or “implementation” phase or can include both. One or more members can conduct a project. For example, a single project might restore marsh in a specific geographic location. Another example of a project might be the planning, engineering, and design required to advance a marsh restoration proposal to a construction-ready status.
- **Program:** A suite of intrinsically-linked restoration and/or conservation projects that must be implemented together in order to achieve the desired outcome. A program may be covered by one unified Council environmental compliance review, as appropriate, and should have a common set of performance measures to effectively assess and measure outcomes. Projects funded within a given program may be related in terms of geography, environmental stressors, resources, restoration and/or protection approaches and techniques, and more. A program can be separated into a “planning” or “implementation” phase, or can include both. One or more members can conduct a program. For example, a single program might be a Gulfwide environmental monitoring effort.

Planning and Implementation Phases

Through a collaborative process, the Council considers proposals from members that address the planning and/or the implementation phases of a project or program. If a project or program is approved for planning funding only, subsequent implementation funding is not necessarily guaranteed. The definitions of these phases include examples of the types of activities the Council might fund under that phase. The list is meant to be descriptive rather than limiting.

- **Planning** – Proposals may include: planning and development of ecosystem restoration projects and programs; cost estimates; feasibility analysis; engineering and design; environmental compliance and permitting; scientific elements including evaluation and establishment of monitoring requirements and methods to report outcomes and impacts; and public engagement.
- **Implementation** – Proposals may include: construction; public outreach and education; and measurement, evaluation, and reporting of outcomes and impacts of restoration activities.

While focused on the long-term recovery of the Gulf Coast, this approach will allow the Council to invest in specific activities that can be carried out in the near-term to help ensure on-the-ground results to restore the overall health of the ecosystem.

2019 Planning Framework

In August 2019, the Council finalized the 2019 *Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council Planning Framework* ([2019 Planning Framework](#)). Through its collaborative process, the Council determined that additional strategic guidance could help ensure that Council-Selected Restoration Component funds are used as effectively as possible in supporting ecosystem restoration. The Council developed the 2019 Planning Framework to provide this guidance. The Planning Framework serves as a “bridge” between the Council’s overarching goals and objectives identified in the Comprehensive Plan and the specific restoration projects and programs approved in future FPLs.

The 2019 Planning Framework lists priority restoration approaches and techniques (Figure 4), their relationship to the Comprehensive Plan goals and objectives, and associated geographic areas. The purpose of this document was to provide the public and potential funding partners with an indication of the kinds of projects and programs that were anticipated to be developed for funding consideration when developing its next FPL. As part of the process of developing future FPLs, the 2019 Planning Framework will be reviewed and revised as needed to incorporate outcomes and lessons learned from previously implemented projects, scientific and technical developments, changing policy, public input, and other planning considerations.

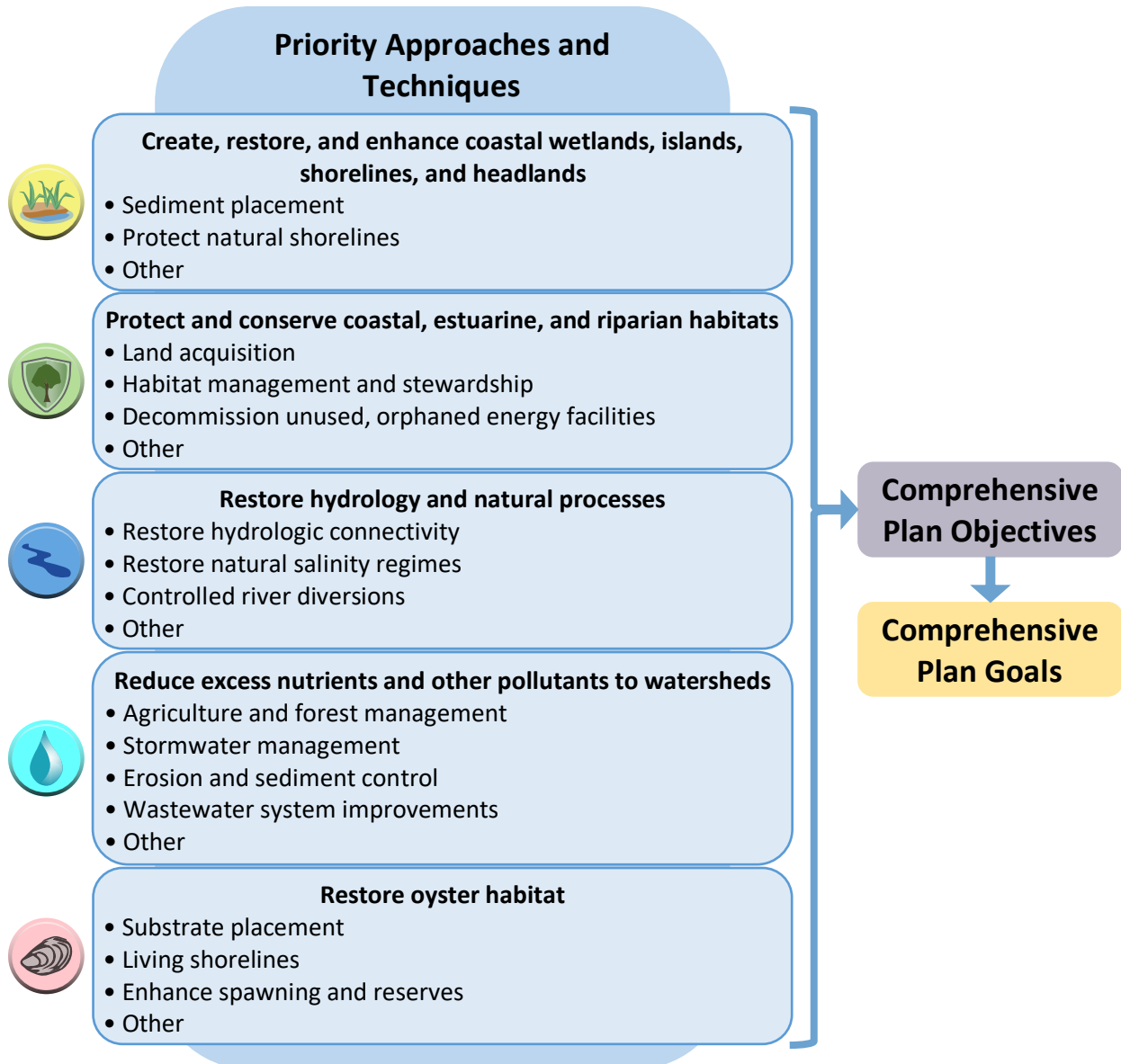


Figure 4. The 2019 Planning Framework priority approaches and techniques can be applied to support the Comprehensive Plan objectives and goals. Priority approaches are shown in bold; techniques are in the bullets beneath each approach.

Effective Proposal Development

The RESTORE Act directs the Council to fund and implement projects and programs through its members. The Council periodically requests proposals from its eleven state and federal members to consider for funding through the Council-selected Restoration Component. Council members can also submit proposals on behalf of Federally recognized Tribes. Individual Council members may solicit and then choose to “sponsor”—submit to the Council for consideration—projects and programs. The Council provides opportunities for the public to provide input on restoration ideas through focused stakeholder meetings hosted by individual members as well as Council-hosted public meetings. The Council considers the input from the public when developing proposals and, ultimately, an FPL. The Council also actively coordinates and collaborates with other regional restoration efforts to leverage resources for the greatest ecosystem benefit.

2015 Initial FPL Process

The process for developing the 2015 Initial FPL began with an invitation to each Council member in August 2014 to submit up to five proposals each. In addition to their five proposals, federal Council members could also submit proposals on behalf of Federally recognized Tribes (Tribes). All proposals were required to follow the [2014 Proposal Submission Guidelines](#). The Council received 50 submissions (including five proposed on behalf of Tribes) from its members, which were built upon experience from past ecosystem restoration plans and projects and reflected public input provided to the Council during development of the 2013 Initial Comprehensive Plan and as part of the FPL development process.

Each proposal underwent a science review by three external experts from both inside and outside the Gulf Coast region to assess whether the project utilized the best available science. The term best available science (BAS) is defined in the RESTORE Act as science that, *“maximizes the quality, objectivity, and integrity of information, including statistical information; uses peer-reviewed and publicly available data; and clearly documents and communicates risks and uncertainties in the scientific basis for such projects.”*

Proposals submitted to the Council from its members were evaluated according to a three-step process that included verification of eligibility, determination of whether proposals could be combined for greater benefit, and evaluation against the RESTORE Act criteria.

In several instances while finalizing the 2015 Initial FPL, only a portion of a project or program submitted by a member was selected for funding to maximize the use of the available funds.

Review and Refinement of the Process

Council members and the public suggested a number of improvements during the Council's 2016 review of the development of the 2015 Initial FPL. In particular, many recommended improving collaboration among Council members in the development of proposed restoration activities. The RESTORE Act inherently promotes collaboration by joining the five Gulf States and six federal agencies together in a shared effort to advance Gulf restoration.

The Council recognizes that a key component of effective collaboration is facilitating meaningful engagement with local, state, regional and federal governments, Tribes, private businesses, academics and technical/science communities, NGOs, and the public. In particular, there is a clear need to coordinate closely with other Gulf restoration and conservation funding efforts including NRDA, NFWF, and other federal programs. Such coordination can help leverage resources and integrate complementary restoration efforts.

It is for this reason that the Council approved the [2017 CPS FPL](#), which was intended to foster increased collaboration among members and with interested stakeholders. With the use of the funds provided through the 2017 CPS FPL, the Council was able to leverage the broad range of expertise and resources among its members and partners to improve the development of restoration activities under the Council-Selected Restoration Component. This included developing the 2019 Planning Framework to allow more effective collaboration with funding partners and improve transparency of decision making by signaling restoration priorities prior to initiating planning for FPL 3.

2020-21 Funded Priorities List 3 Process

As the Council began considering how to proceed in the development of FPL 3, Council members collaborated among themselves and with stakeholders to identify and shape project and program concepts for potential inclusion. In the early stages of collaboration, members identified and discussed potential priorities, which ranged from broad programmatic goals to specific project concepts. It was through this process that members determined it would be both financially and ecologically beneficial to implement FPL 3 in two phases. The first phase, [2020 FPL 3a](#), was approved by the Council in February 2020. The second phase, [2021 FPL 3b](#), was approved in April 2021.

Throughout this process, project and program concepts were reviewed and discussed by all members, refined and, in some cases, dropped from further consideration based on feedback and other factors (e.g., availability of alternative funding sources). These discussions helped members shape their respective project and program concepts as they developed FPL proposals. The Council believes these efforts led to a more collaborative and deliberative approach to developing FPL 3 than was used for the 2015 Initial FPL.

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In support of its revised process of developing FPLs, the Council developed updated guidance in 2019 for its members on the content and review process for Council-Selected Restoration Component funding proposals. This updated guidance is called the *2019 FPL 3 Proposal Submission Guidelines and Review Process* ([2019 Submission Guidelines](#)).

In the early stages of collaborating on the development of FPL 3, members identified two high priority projects and invited the sponsors to submit proposals for those two projects. These proposals adhered to the 2019 Submission Guidelines and underwent the review and public engagement processes described therein. At the end of the process, those two projects were included in 2020 FPL 3a, as approved by the Council.

As the Council proceeded with developing 2021 FPL 3b, the Council chose to limit each member to a maximum of five proposals to manage time and resources (as was done in the 2015 Initial FPL). Proposals submitted by a federal member on behalf of a Federally recognized Tribe did not count toward this limit. The Council then reviewed all proposals for compliance with the RESTORE Act, consistency with the Comprehensive Plan and 2019 Planning Framework, and compliance with all applicable environmental laws.

To meet the intent of the RESTORE Act and to support the Council's 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update commitment to science-based decision-making, all 2021 FPL 3b proposals underwent an [updated BAS review process](#) that included three anonymous external science reviews (including reviews by experts from within and outside the Gulf Coast region) and an internal BAS Review Panel. The purpose of this internal panel was to use Council member-agency technical expertise to consider external reviews, identify ways to further strengthen the scientific basis of each proposal and, as applicable, identify potential synergies between proposals not identified prior to their submission.

After all proposal reviews were completed, members responded to review comments pertaining to their respective proposals, including revising their proposals as warranted. The revised proposals, as well as the proposal "packages" containing the reviews, responses, Internal BAS Review Panel discussions and original proposals were then made available to the public on the Council's website.

At the time the revised proposals were re-submitted, the combined cost of the proposals exceeded the funding available for 2021 FPL 3b. As the collaborative process among the members continued, some proposals were scaled down and others were withdrawn from consideration. The remaining selected proposals (now referred to as [activity descriptions](#)) were then compiled into 2021 FPL 3b.

2021 FPL 3b is designed to address ecosystem needs across the Gulf while also maintaining consistency with the 2019 Planning Framework and considering 2020 FPL 3a investments. Consistent with its commitment to collaboration, the Council finalized a 2021 FPL 3b funding allocation that is supported by all members.

As it proceeds toward implementation of approved FPLs and consideration of projects and programs to include in future FPLs, the Council will continue its work to strengthen partnerships, identify leveraging opportunities, and help ensure the most effective use of the resources entrusted to it.

Council Funding Strategy

The [RESTORE Act](#) requires the Council to provide a description of the manner in which amounts projected to be made available to the Council from the Gulf Coast Restoration Trust Fund (Trust Fund) will be allocated for the succeeding ten years (the “Ten-Year Funding Strategy”). In light of the ongoing litigation with BP and other responsible parties in 2013, the Council did not include a Ten-Year Funding strategy in the [2013 Initial Comprehensive Plan](#) due to the uncertainty regarding the amounts and timing of funds that might ultimately be available. With the final amounts and timing settled in April 2016, the Council was able to provide an initial Ten-Year Funding Strategy in the [2016 Comprehensive Plan Update](#). Recognizing that this strategy will remain relevant for the duration of its work to implement ecosystem restoration, the Council has updated the name of the strategy to the “Council Funding Strategy” (Funding Strategy).

In developing the Funding Strategy, the Council sought to accomplish the following:

- Ensure compliance with the RESTORE Act
- Provide finer granularity regarding how the Council will address the goals and objectives over the next ten years and beyond
- Provide increased certainty, predictability, and guidance for project and program planning
- Maintain flexibility to adapt to new information such as environmental changes, scientific advances, and feedback on the effectiveness of past and ongoing on-the-ground restoration actions
- Build on lessons learned in the development of the Initial and subsequent FPLs

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To accomplish these objectives, the Funding Strategy consists of a vision statement, a discussion of the frequency of future FPLs, and enhancements to the Council's commitments from previous iterations of the Comprehensive Plan. Specific projects and programs are identified in FPLs. In this 2022 Comprehensive Plan Update, the Council reflects on its progress over the past five years in implementing the Funding Strategy, and provides updates based upon lessons learned over this time period.

Council Funding Strategy Vision Statement

The Council recognizes that a clear and concise vision statement can help direct and shape future funding decisions. The Council believes that its vision statement for the Funding Strategy should include reference to both the desired environmental outcomes and the processes used to accomplish them. In these processes the Council will build upon the tremendous restoration experience, scientific expertise, and other capabilities of its diverse membership of state and federal agencies.

The Council sought to capture this sentiment, as well as other key elements, as it developed the following vision statement:

A healthy and productive Gulf ecosystem achieved through collaboration on strategic restoration projects and programs.

Funded Priorities List Frequency

Pursuant to the [Consent Decree](#), the Council receives annual installments of approximately \$90M over a period of fifteen years, with the exception of the second year which was approximately \$45M, for use in the Council-Selected Restoration Component (Table 1).

In the 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update, the Council indicated that it envisioned FPLs being developed approximately every three years. The purpose is to allow funds to accrue over the annual BP payouts to enable the funding of large-scale projects and programs and maximize the use of available resources. As seen with the timespan of the completed FPLs, this is a general approach, flexible enough to meet changing Council needs. The Council does not contemplate an irreversible schedule for the frequency and number of FPLs over the duration of the Council-Selected Restoration Component, but rather to maintain the flexibility to adapt and optimize ecosystem restoration outcomes.

Supporting Large-Scale Projects and Programs

One of the four RESTORE Act Priority Criteria calls on the Council to fund:

“Large-scale projects and programs that are projected to substantially contribute to restoring and protecting the natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches, and coastal wetlands of the Gulf Coast ecosystem.”

The Council seeks to optimize ecosystem restoration benefits by advancing large-scale solutions that take into account the environmental conditions of a given region of the Gulf. This could be achieved through the synergy of multiple connected projects or a single large project or program.

Limiting the frequency of FPLs also provides the Council with time to explore leveraging opportunities that could be used to support large-scale activities, including partnering with NRDA, NFWF, and other federal funding programs. Continuing to coordinate and collaborate with other restoration partners is essential not only to effectively leverage resources but also to avoid duplication of effort.

Building on Council Commitments

A foundational element of the 2013 Initial Comprehensive Plan was the inclusion of commitments to provide guidance for the Council’s path forward. Through the process of reviewing the Council’s work, including the process used to develop the [2015 Initial FPL](#), these commitments were refined and amplified in the 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update. In this 2022 Comprehensive Plan Update, the Council describes its progress toward its commitments thus far, and establishes a baseline that the Council will build upon.

In the 2013 Initial Comprehensive Plan and 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update, the Council outlined five overall commitments. The Council builds upon these commitments in this 2022 Comprehensive Plan Update by highlighting the importance of efficient, effective, and transparent environmental compliance. While language regarding environmental compliance was included in the 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update, the Council is now elevating this to a stand-alone commitment.

The Council's six updated commitments are:

1. Taking a regional ecosystem-based approach to restoration
2. Leveraging resources and partnerships
3. Maintaining and enhancing public engagement, inclusion, and transparency
4. Providing efficient, effective, and transparent environmental compliance
5. Applying science-based decision-making
6. Delivering results and measuring impacts

Below is a summary of each commitment, including progress the Council has made in the past five years.

1. Commitment to a Regional Ecosystem-based Approach to Restoration

The Council recognizes that upland, estuarine, and marine habitats are intrinsically connected. The Council thus continues to promote an ecosystem-based and landscape-scale restoration approach within the Gulf Coast region. A regional approach to restoration will more effectively leverage the resources of the Gulf Coast and promote large-scale ecosystem recovery. The Council recognizes that regional ecosystem restoration activities can also have multiple social, economic, cultural, and environmental benefits. For example, restoring habitats that sustainably support diverse fish and wildlife populations can also provide an array of commercial, recreational, and other human uses of the ecosystem.

Watershed/Estuary-Based Approach

Encompassed within this commitment is the Council's commitment to a watershed/estuary-based approach to addressing regional environmental challenges. In the past, stakeholders cautioned the Council against funding "random acts of restoration". The Council shares this perspective and believes that focusing on watersheds, in concert with foundational Gulf-wide activities, is one approach to ensuring that funds are spent in a way that contributes to comprehensive Gulf restoration. With the approach, the Council engages stakeholders, and strategically addresses priority goals. The Council makes funding decisions that leverage limited restoration resources for maximum effectiveness, while also supporting planning, science, and other activities that maximize the potential for success.

In the 2015 Initial FPL, the Council focused on key watersheds/estuaries to concentrate its resources for the greatest ecosystem benefit. The Council further committed to using a watershed/estuary-based approach to restoration in the 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update. Geographic areas described in the [2019 Planning Framework](#) are a step toward identifying

priority watersheds/estuaries for investment to meet Comprehensive Plan goals and objectives. These geographic areas vary in size from specific watersheds/estuaries to coverage of the entire coastal area of one or more states. To some degree, this range reflects the extent to which individual projects have been identified within the broader programs. In some geographic areas, the planning process may be advanced sufficiently to have identified specific restoration activities within a watershed/estuary. In others, additional planning and review of restoration options may be needed before identifying specific actions. In addition, these geographic areas reflect the anticipated collaboration — among members, among funding partners, and across states — needed to address broader environmental stressors.

To allow for the additional planning needed, the Council approved programs in [2021 FPL 3b](#) that committed funds to specific restoration priorities such as water quality improvement, and land acquisition and conservation. Many of these programs did not identify specific projects or watersheds/estuaries at the time of approval of 2021 FPL 3b. Rather, they included decision-making processes that the sponsoring member would follow to prioritize projects that will best support the primary goal and objective of a given program. Members will continue to identify priority watersheds/estuaries as they identify specific projects for implementation within the programs, and provide opportunities for public input into the selection of the projects.

Addressing Risk, Sustainability, and Resilience

Another component of the commitment to a regional ecosystem-based approach to restoration includes addressing risk, sustainability, and resilience. Healthy and sustainable ecosystems are essential for thriving and resilient coastal communities. Cultures, economies, and societies across the Gulf Coast region are built upon and sustained by natural ecosystem services that include, but are not limited to providing clean water, abundant fisheries, and storm protection. Further loss and degradation of the Gulf environment will reduce these social, cultural, and economic benefits. By restoring and protecting the Gulf environment, the Council can help communities enhance their ability to recover from natural and man-made disasters and thrive in the face of changing environmental conditions.

The Council's Comprehensive Plan goals and objectives are designed to encompass the types of actions needed to restore ecosystem health and sustainability across the Gulf Coast region. To meet its goals and objectives, the Council must consider a wide range of past, ongoing, and emerging threats to the environment. For example, in some areas sea-level rise combined with ongoing subsidence can pose a significant risk to coastal ecosystems and communities, and to the Council's own coastal restoration investments. Water quality degradation, which can result from oil spills, pollution or landscape-scale activities in coastal and upland areas (e.g., silviculture, agriculture, channelization, and waste disposal), is another environmental issue

that impacts the resilience and sustainability of coastal communities.

The Council considers inherent risks to the efficacy of individual projects or programs, ranging from impacts on performance (due to unforeseen events such as hurricanes) to changes in costs (as experienced during the on-going COVID-19 pandemic) which could potentially impact the ability to complete a project or program. The Council is committed to using the best available science to consider relative sea-level rise, water quality, and other risks as it makes coastal restoration funding decisions. To this end, members provided information on these risks as they pertained to proposed activities submitted for funding consideration in [2020 FPL 3a](#) and [2021 FPL 3b](#).

In making funding decisions, members also consider which projects they could fund to help address risks to community resilience. Through restoration and protection of the Gulf coast environment, the Council supports the resilience of Gulf communities in the face of disaster and changing environmental conditions. For example:

- The FPL 3b [Florida Gulf Coast Resiliency Program](#), sponsored by Florida, supports the primary Comprehensive Plan goal to *Enhance Community Resilience* through activities to identify vulnerabilities and implement sustainable solutions to improve coastal resiliency. Developing strategies to address resiliency is critical to Florida's ability to adapt to a changing coastline. This program is intended to provide environmental benefits such as resiliency improvements, protections against wave energy and storm surge, habitat protection, sustaining healthy wildlife populations, and recreation and tourism opportunities.
- The FPL 3b [Shoreline Protection Through Living Shorelines](#) program, sponsored by Texas, supports the construction of large-scale living shorelines that will enhance the resiliency of coastal Texas by stabilizing estuarine shorelines and protecting large tracts of land and coastal resources along the Texas coast. Living shorelines can reduce damage to shorelines by damping wave action and trapping sediments, thereby elevating shore profiles to a level that will support marsh vegetation. This program is also intended to enhance ecosystem function by creating hard-structure habitats for fish and oysters, removing excess nutrients and sediments, providing seagrass protection, and improving water quality.

2. Commitment to Leveraging Resources and Partnerships

The Council recognizes that coordination and collaboration among members and its restoration partners is critical to the success of Gulf coast restoration, and continues to encourage partnerships, welcoming additional public and private financial and technical support to

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maximize outcomes and impacts. Such partnerships add value through integration of public and private sector skills, knowledge, and expertise.

To maximize ecosystem benefits, the Council continues to pursue opportunities to align and leverage activities funded from the Council-selected Restoration Component with investments made by other coastal restoration programs, as well as its own work using Spill Impact Component funds. As implementation of activities continues, the Council will continue to consider the synergistic benefits of its investments with those of other programs, including NRDA, NFWF, and other restoration (including natural infrastructure), conservation, and science programs in the Gulf.

Through its collaborative process for developing 2020-21 FPL 3, the Council identified several opportunities to leverage other funding streams, including extending or directly building upon some of the activities it approved for funding in the 2015 Initial FPL. For example:

- The FPL 3a [River Reintroduction into Maurepas Swamp](#) implementation project, sponsored by Louisiana, will restore processes that enhance ecosystem health and reduce or minimize future loss of approximately 45,000 acres of baldcypress-water tupelo forest in coastal Louisiana by reintroducing Mississippi River water into the Maurepas Swamp. This investment will build upon the planning portion of the project that was funded in the 2015 Initial FPL. The Council's investment in this large-scale restoration project will not only enhance valuable coastal forest habitat, but it may also contribute to community resilience in the region. Congress recently approved emergency appropriations for a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers hurricane risk reduction levee in the vicinity of this project. A portion of the levee project overlaps with a portion of the Council's Maurepas project. By investing in the 2020 FPL 3a Maurepas project, the Council thus has an opportunity to realize cost savings by consolidating the engineering, design, and construction of the overlapping portions of the two projects.
- The FPL 3b [Enhancing Gulf Waters through Forested Watershed Restoration](#) program, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), will be implemented in a way that attracts additional partners and investors, including conservation organizations, universities, local governments, and others. Such an approach may create leveraging opportunities beyond that which is currently identified, increase potential for innovative solutions, and increase positive outcomes of forest restoration for the Gulf Coast region.
- The [Chenier Plain Ecosystem Restoration Program](#), sponsored by Texas, intends to restore and conserve high-quality coastal habitats within the Chenier Plain complex of Texas. The effort to restore the Texas Chenier Plain has been ongoing since at least 1990. In 2013, the Salt Bayou Marsh Workgroup (Workgroup) published a restoration

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plan describing the status of the Texas Chenier Plain, a review of past and ongoing projects, and recommendations for future work. Workgroup members include federal and state agencies, non-governmental organizations, and local and regional governments. This FPL 3b program will further leverage the decades of experience and technical recommendations of the Workgroup and other stakeholders to implement priority activities in this region.

- The [Florida Water Quality Improvement Program](#), sponsored by Florida, is intended to improve water quality and quantity by building upon and implementing restoration plans and strategies developed by Florida through previous efforts. Florida has designed the program in a way that will leverage *Deepwater Horizon* NRDA funds, as well as other federal and state funds. Project selection under this FPL 3b program will consider each project's ability to leverage other funds to expand the impact of awards.
- The [Coastal Nearshore Habitat Restoration and Development Program in Mississippi](#), sponsored by Mississippi, will build upon two planning efforts undertaken through NFWF's Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund (NFWF-GEBCF) and the [Enhancing Opportunities for Beneficial Use of Dredge Sediments](#) project funded in the 2015 Initial FPL. These planning efforts are currently funding engineering, design, and permitting on specific projects that could potentially be implemented through this FPL 3b program.
- The [Gulf of Mexico Coast Conservation Corps \(GulfCorps\) Program](#), sponsored by the U.S. Department of Commerce/National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the [Tribal Youth Coastal Restoration Program](#), sponsored by the U.S. Department of the Interior/Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), will continue the work of the [Gulf of Mexico Habitat Restoration via Conservation Corps Partnerships](#) program funded in the 2015 Initial FPL. Further, these two programs seek 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. Initial connections were also made and may be strengthened between GulfCorps' partner organizations and the Tribal Youth Conservation Corps to inform past and future Tribal Corps graduates of GulfCorps recruiting opportunities as tribal students advance their career development. Such coordination and awareness will continue under these FPL 3b programs to provide restoration benefits throughout the Gulf.
- In FPL 3a, the Council approved planning and implementation funds for the [Perdido River Land Conservation and Habitat Enhancements](#) project in Alabama. In FPL 3b, the Council has approved planning funds to Alabama for the [Perdido Watershed Water Quality Improvements and Restoration Assessment Program](#). This program will coordinate the location and sequencing of additional restoration projects that could

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improve water quality and habitat and to develop monitoring protocols to assess the potential collective impacts of restoration projects within the watershed. The FPL 3b [Florida Water Quality Improvement Program](#) may also offer opportunities for Florida and Alabama to collaborate on conservation work in this shared watershed.

Many of the activities in 2021 FPL 3b also increase investments that are being made in Gulf Coast States with other RESTORE Act funds. For example, the [Water Quality Improvement Program for Coastal Mississippi Waters](#), sponsored by Mississippi, will be coordinated with water quality investments the State is making using funding from the Direct and Spill Impact Components of the RESTORE Act. Collectively, these funds, as overseen by Mississippi, will allow for the advancement of priority projects to improve the condition of the Mississippi Sound watershed.

In addition to leveraging on-the-ground restoration activities, 2021 FPL 3b activities continue to build upon the science-based decision-support tools funded by the Council in the 2015 Initial FPL. For example, the FPL 3b Internal BAS Review Panel discussions highlighted how hydrologic restoration programs, such as the [Enhancing Gulf Waters Through Forested Watershed Restoration](#) program, sponsored by USDA, will be able to use the streamflow data modeled by the 2015 Initial FPL *Baseline Flow, Gage Analysis & On-Line Tool to Support Restoration* project to calibrate soil and water assessment tools. Similarly, the Internal BAS Review Panel also discussed other Council-funded science tools, such as the Council's *Gulf Coast Monitoring and Assessment Portal* and the *Strategic Conservation Assessment for Gulf Landscapes* tools. These tools can provide support for 2021 FPL 3b activities by identifying reference monitoring activities and opportunities for land acquisition. [Additional information about these tools](#) is available on the Council's website.

Exploring Opportunities for Additional Leveraged Funding

Combating all of the ecological threats in the Gulf is a complex challenge that greatly exceeds existing and expected restoration funding. The Council is committed to maximizing the effectiveness of funds within its purview while also continuing to identify and leverage new sources of funding to support current and future restoration work. In addition to the Council's existing restoration partners discussed in this 2022 Comprehensive Plan Update, there are other parties that have a growing interest in participating in ecosystem restoration. For example, private-sector and nonprofit entities are exploring new and innovative ways to bring capital to restoration activities. Given its own limitations relative to the size and scope of the Gulf restoration challenge, the Council welcomes potential partners and is interested in exploring ways such endeavors can potentially help the Council to advance its mission. One recent example is the \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill signed in 2021, which includes funds to address coastal infrastructure needs. The Council is committed to open dialogue and future collaboration with such partners in this emerging arena.

3. Commitment to Maintaining and Enhancing Public Engagement, Inclusion, and Transparency

Through both the continued development of this 2022 Comprehensive Plan Update and the selection of ecosystem restoration activities, the Council reaffirms its commitment to seeking broad participation and input from the diverse stakeholders who live, work, and play in the Gulf Coast region. The Council will continue to provide opportunities to form strategic partnerships and collaboration on innovative ecosystem restoration projects, programs, and approaches. The Council will continue to offer public engagement opportunities that reflect the richness and diversity of Gulf Coast communities to ensure ongoing public participation in the Council's restoration efforts.

The Council appreciates the importance of strong, productive, and predictable public engagement and maintaining transparency throughout its operations and decision-making. The Council remains committed to setting and maintaining public engagement and transparency. To that end, the Council has built upon and enhanced its ongoing policies and programs since the 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update. These ongoing activities include:

- Addressing language barriers for communities impacted by the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill
- Providing live and on demand American Sign Language translation of public meetings and webinars
- 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 (e.g., Florida's Apalachicola Watershed)
- Providing individualized outreach to underserved communities and areas, as needs are identified

Broad and inclusive public input assists the Council in selecting 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 underserved communities and stakeholders across the Gulf Coast region. To accomplish this, the Council will continue to work to address varied challenges, including those associated with language barriers and barriers to stakeholder participation in public meetings. For example, partway through the process for developing 2021 FPL 3b, the COVID-19 pandemic required Council members to shift their approach from meeting in person to finding effective ways to meet virtually both with one another and with stakeholders. The Council looks forward to returning to in-person meetings

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that allow for both formal and informal discussions with stakeholders. However, it intends to continue to offer recorded webinars as an additional means of engaging stakeholders who may not travel to in-person meetings.

To continue to enhance its commitments to public engagement and transparency, the Council is committed to expanding its work with the following actions:

- Providing Spanish translations of major Council documents in addition to the ongoing Vietnamese translations. The Council will also consider translating any other major Council documents into Spanish, Vietnamese, and/or other languages upon request.
- Providing enhanced on-demand virtual access for recorded public webinars on the Council's website, www.restorethegulf.gov. To facilitate access by Vietnamese and Spanish speaking communities, the Council will provide Vietnamese and Spanish subtitles for recorded webinars and meetings.
- Developing and updating a list of publications and media outlets that serve or otherwise reach underserved communities. This list may be used, for example, to inform such communities of public comment opportunities offered by the Council and its members.

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

4. Commitment to Efficient, Effective, and Transparent Environmental Compliance

As with all federal agencies, the Council must comply with applicable federal environmental laws, regulations, and Executive Orders. Compliance with these requirements is critical for avoiding unintended adverse impacts, informing funding decisions, and providing important public engagement opportunities.

The Council is committed to maintaining the highest standard for efficient, effective, and transparent environmental compliance. To that end, the Council continually seeks ways to improve the efficiency and timeliness of permitting and regulatory reviews while also meeting statutory requirements and providing sound analyses of Gulf restoration projects. Interagency coordination and communication among Council members helps address that goal. Since 2015, where appropriate, the Council has adopted existing National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documents of its members to address its environmental compliance responsibilities. For example, the Council instituted the use of NEPA Categorical Exclusions (CEs) belonging to federal members to expedite approval of critical restoration projects and programs. The Council has used this approach to:

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- Acquire and preserve valuable coastal habitat in Texas, Florida, and Alabama
- Plug orphaned oil and gas wells in Texas
- Employ agriculture Best Management Practices to improve habitat and water quality across the Gulf Coast Region
- Implement a stormwater and septic to sewer project to improve coastal Florida water quality

This innovative approach to environmental compliance has allowed the Council to both expedite projects and decrease planning costs, leaving more funding for project implementation.

In addition, the Council leads the Gulf Coast Interagency Environmental Restoration Working Group (GCIERWG) to facilitate early, consistent, and effective interagency coordination. This includes concurrent environmental compliance reviews of proposed restoration projects, sharing of information critical to project review and permitting, and development of environmental compliance efficiency tools and processes. The GCIERWG engages the Council's experts in environmental compliance and policy to achieve more effective, efficient, transparent, and timely permitting and project authorization through interagency review of priority restoration actions. The GCIERWG began as a partnership of the Council's federal agencies and expanded to include state members in recognition of the critical role state experts play in both project sponsorship and compliance.

The GCIERWG assists in the sharing of member NEPA documentation, such as the use of member CEs referenced above. The GCIERWG has also engaged in pilot efforts that seek to enhance environmental compliance efficiency through pre-application consultation and focused interagency coordination on two 2015 Initial FPL projects. As planning and implementation of 2021 FPL 3b restoration activities moves forward, the Council will build upon these initial successes using collaborative interagency environmental compliance review to improve transparency for the public and speed the delivery of restoration to the Gulf Coast Region.

5. Commitment to Science-Based Decision-Making

Under the RESTORE Act, the Council is required to *“undertake projects and programs, using the best available science [BAS], that would restore and protect the natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches, coastal wetlands, and economy of the Gulf Coast.”* The Council remains committed to reviewing and adapting its work over time in response to changing conditions, and to incorporate new science and information.

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One mechanism the Council uses to meet this commitment is to conduct BAS reviews of all project and program proposals submitted for funding under both the Council-Selected Restoration and Spill Impact Components. In the 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update, the Council made clear its intention to explore different approaches for improving upon this science review process for Council-Selected Restoration Component projects and programs. Council staff developed an [updated BAS Review Process](#) for 2020-2021 FPL 3 that incorporated an internal BAS Proposal Review Panel in addition to external reviews. The internal science review panel's collaborative review of all proposals offered increased opportunities to identify project interactions, synergies, and risks. This updated review process assisted the Council in selecting projects that will maximize benefits and support a holistic approach to Gulf restoration.

The Council has also furthered its commitment to science-based decision-making through continued science coordination across its member agencies and the Gulf scientific community. As part of the 2015 Initial FPL [Council Monitoring and Assessment Program Development](#) (CMAP), the Council funded a [Council Monitoring and Assessment Work Group \(CMAWG\)](#). This workgroup, composed of technical experts from each member agency, supports the Council in meeting its commitments to monitoring and adaptive management and the use of BAS. Ongoing coordination around science and monitoring has already reaped tangible benefits such as alignment of overlapping tasks across entities, shared work products, and plans for future leveraging of shared resources. Because of these benefits, the Council decided to continue the CMAWG beyond the CMAP award period, formalizing their work through the approval of the [Council Monitoring and Adaptive Management Guidelines](#) in 2020. These guidelines broadly describe the roles, responsibilities, communication and authorization pathways, and broad activities that may be needed for the Council to fulfill its monitoring and adaptive management responsibilities.

In addition to internal science coordination through the CMAWG, the Council also engages in external Gulf science coordination. For example, the Council participates in the Gulf Restoration Science Programs Ad Hoc Coordination Forum. This forum, hosted by the NOAA RESTORE Science Program, provides a venue for all Gulf science and restoration programs to come together to work towards consistency in metrics and data management, share funding opportunities, and look for synergies across the academic and restoration communities in the Gulf.

6. Commitment to Delivering Results and Measuring Impacts

Over its lifetime, the Council will invest over \$3B in Gulf Coast ecosystem and economic restoration activities. These investments will not only advance the Council's vision of a healthy and productive Gulf ecosystem, but also result in diverse scientific and economic data

observations that will be used to demonstrate the benefits of Council investments. The Council recognizes the importance of comprehensive planning for the collection and compilation of data that can be compared across projects. Comparable data enables reporting at multiple scales, including project- and program-specific scales, as well as potential future larger-scale assessments across the Gulf Coast region. Understanding outcomes and impacts will further help to achieve tangible results and ensure that funds are invested in a meaningful way.

Measuring and Ensuring Success

The Council continues to improve its use of ecosystem science, monitoring, and data management to report on the overall success of restoration. As described in the [CMAWG Annual Workplans](#), the Council uses the CMAWG to serve as a forum for the Council to collectively address monitoring and adaptive management topics relevant to multiple Council member agencies, including encouraging compatibility of monitoring and data management procedures used by all members.

To help assess the success of Council-funded activities, each project or program must include an Observational Data Plan (ODP) that contains information on how monitoring data will be collected, managed, and made publicly available. In 2021, with the assistance of the CMAWG, the Council updated the [Council's ODP Guidelines](#) to identify consistent metrics and parameters of success, appropriate monitoring protocols, and further define common standards for Council data collection and management. For each type of activity the Council may fund, the updated ODP Guidelines provide recommendations on appropriate metrics and parameters to track success. Recommendations are grouped by each of the Council's Comprehensive Plan objectives, showing which objectives each parameter may help track. Through these recommendations, selected metrics and parameters can be used to evaluate how funded activities are meeting the Comprehensive Plan goals and objectives and to track annual performance.

Taking advantage of opportunities to build programmatic and science efficiencies, the ODP Guidelines update was collaboratively developed to foster consistency in data collection and management across Gulfwide monitoring efforts. Recommendations were developed in coordination with Gulf restoration funding partners, including the Natural Resources Damage Assessment (NRDA) trustees and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), and build off of analyses from the 2015 Initial FPL funded CMAP. By fostering comparability and compatibility among robust datasets, this work will enable broader assessments of outcomes, support improvements to ecosystem models, and help address the uncertainties related to restoration, which in turn will inform adaptive management and Council decision-making related to investments.

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As shown in Figure 5, the ODP Guidelines use the [2019 Planning Framework](#) priority approaches and techniques to organize recommendations for metrics and parameters and to demonstrate how they will be employed to support Comprehensive Plan goals and objectives of a funded activity. Utilizing this organization, the Council anticipates that the benefits of its investments will be able to be reported over time, not only at the scale of individual activities but also for particular approaches, techniques, and watersheds.

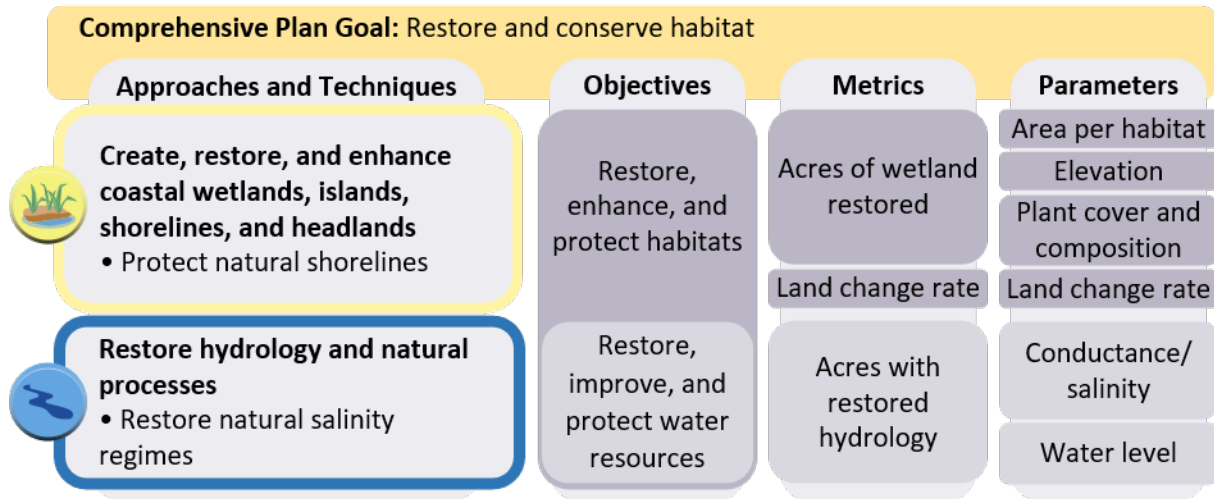


Figure 5. Using an example project, this figure illustrates how selected objectives would be supported by collecting appropriate observational data. In the figure, restoration approaches and techniques are aligned on rows with the objectives they are employed to support, and with metrics for tracking benefits to those objectives. Each metric row aligns with one or more parameters for which data will be collected to enable assessment and reporting.

Program Adaptation

Another element of the Council's commitment to measuring and ensuring success is the application of adaptive management strategies (Figure 6). The purpose is to support meeting the Comprehensive Plan goals and objectives, both for individual activities as well as programmatically across watersheds or other geographically-defined regions. By considering new information gained from monitoring and scientific advancements in its decision-making processes, the Council intends to fulfill its commitment to utilize adaptive management processes to enhance the benefits of its work.

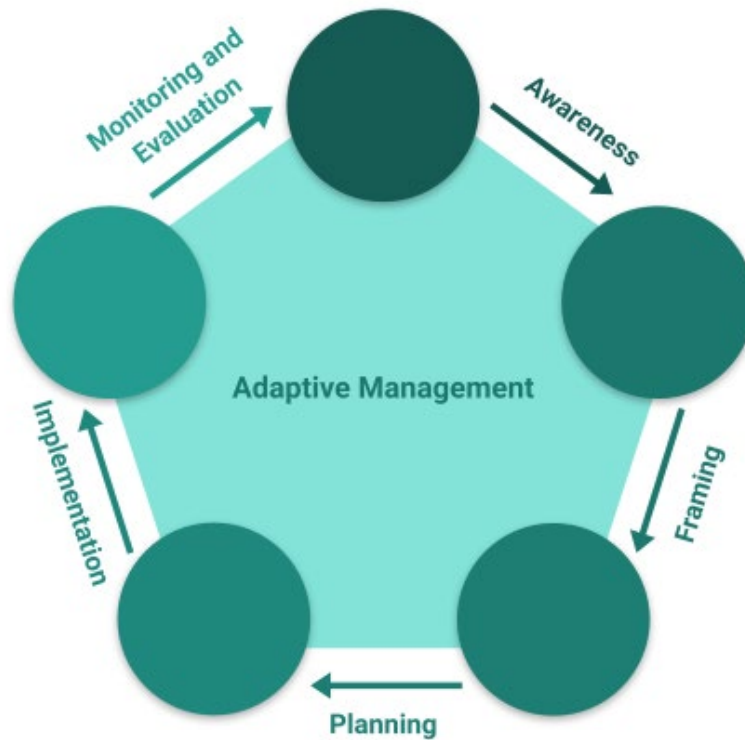


Figure 6. A generalized adaptive management model. Adaptive management starts with formulating awareness of an issue, then framing options for addressing the issue. Planning is conducted to determine the optimal action. From there the action is implemented and monitored to determine how the ecosystem responded to the action. The cycle repeats, incorporating learned information into awareness for future decision-making.

At the level of individual activities (both projects and programs), Council members set quantitative targets for each of their Comprehensive Plan objectives and describe any adaptive management strategies they plan to implement to ensure objectives are met. As set out in the activity's ODP, monitoring data are collected and used to determine whether projects are meeting, or are expected to meet, their targeted objectives. Monitoring data may also be used to signal the need for any corrective actions that may enhance performance, as feasible. Funding recipients also report on how the results of data collection may help to resolve critical uncertainties influencing restoration and management decisions, informing and improving the success of efforts beyond the scope of the activity.

At the programmatic scale, the Council's structure and cyclical process for developing and approving FPLs allows for an adaptive approach to its Council-Selected Restoration Component funding decisions. For watersheds or other geographically-defined areas, the Council utilizes its programmatic documents and processes to generally follow an adaptive process that may best support realization of the Council's vision for the Gulf Coast region (Figure 7).



Figure 7. The Council's use of programmatic documents and processes and cyclical process for developing and approving Funded Priorities Lists allows for adaptive learning. In the Comprehensive Plan, members formulate and refine awareness of issues. Then, through collaboration, members frame options for addressing the issues. Planning is conducted to determine the priority actions that will be funded. From there, the actions are implemented and monitored to determine how the ecosystem responded. The cycle repeats, incorporating learned information into awareness for future decision-making.

To support adaptive improvements through this process, the Council has also made progress on a related commitment made in the 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update: to continue to work toward utilizing science-based restoration targets for the Gulf ecosystem. Quantitative targets are set for individual activities. At larger geographic scales, the Council has broadly identified the goals and objectives that could be advanced for different watersheds and geographic regions, based on key environmental stressors described for each area, and the priority restoration techniques that would best support success. This was first laid out in the 2019 Planning Framework, which supported planning and collaboration undertaken to develop 2020-21 FPL 3.

As FPL-funded activities are implemented and monitored, periodic updates to the Comprehensive Plan provide the opportunity to increase awareness of lessons learned from those activities as the Council prepares for its next cycle of funding. Comprehensive Plan updates allow the Council to review and be responsive to findings from its work and other newly emerging science, as well as information on technological advancements and changed

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environmental or socioeconomic conditions (e.g., impacts from hurricanes, the COVID-19 pandemic, etc.). For example, the 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update incorporated such new information to refine and update the Council's strategies and commitments for how it would make decisions and implement restoration activities. The commitments described in the 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update led the Council to develop and fund the [2017 CPS FPL](#) that provided the funding to meet those commitments, particularly as they relate to collaborative decision-making.

Importantly, collaborative discussions among members — with potential funding partners and with stakeholders — regarding the best approaches to take to address restoration needs in the Gulf led to the development of the 2019 Planning Framework. This enhanced collaboration, which leveraged knowledge and revealed potential complementary activities, was an essential component of the Council's process for selecting the priority activities included in 2020-21 FPL 3. As those activities are implemented in the coming years, they will be monitored, providing information for future restoration efforts.

These and other actions will continue to allow the Council to improve ecosystem restoration and protection outcome and impact measurement and reporting, and assist in the development of local and regional ecosystem models. This work will also help the Council utilize lessons learned to identify and refine priority restoration needs and critical uncertainties related to Gulf restoration and inform adaptive Council decision-making processes related to these investments over time.

Council-Selected Restoration Component Investments to Date

The Council recognizes the unprecedented opportunity it has to restore Gulf ecosystem conditions and functions with this funding, as it represents some of the most substantial investments in landscape-level restoration in U.S. history. Despite this, funds are insufficient to fully address all the needs of the Gulf given the multiple environmental challenges impacting the region. The 2019 Planning Framework was designed to describe priorities that strategically link past and future restoration funding decisions, and place them within the context of the Comprehensive Plan goals and objectives. With each FPL, the Council considers how to build on previous investments while expanding opportunities to meet all of its Comprehensive Plan goals and objectives, consistent with the RESTORE Act Priority Criteria.

The Council follows a multi-step process to award Council-Selected Restoration Component funds (Figure 8). This process ensures that all applicable laws (e.g., the RESTORE Act, environmental and federal grants management laws, and others) as well as Council policies and procedures are adhered to.

First, the Council includes activities (projects and programs) within an FPL, assigning each activity to one of two categories:

- **Approved** - Activities for which all applicable environmental laws have been addressed and for which the Council has formally approved funding via a vote.
- **Budgeted** - Activities that the Council considers to be worthy of potential future funding. The Council budgets funds for the given activities, pending future review and approval via a Council vote. Prior to approval, activities in this category must comply with all applicable environmental laws.

Generally, when activities are budgeted, the activity sponsor is required to submit additional documentation (e.g., federal permits, detailed scopes of work) before the Council will consider formal approval of the activity. The movement of an activity from budgeted to approved occurs via a Council vote to amend the FPL after the required documentation is submitted, the public has commented on the proposed action, and the Council has complied with all applicable environmental laws. A budgeted activity does not in itself constitute a formal Council commitment.

Once an activity is formally approved in an FPL, the sponsoring member applies for a federal award to receive the approved funds needed to complete the activity.

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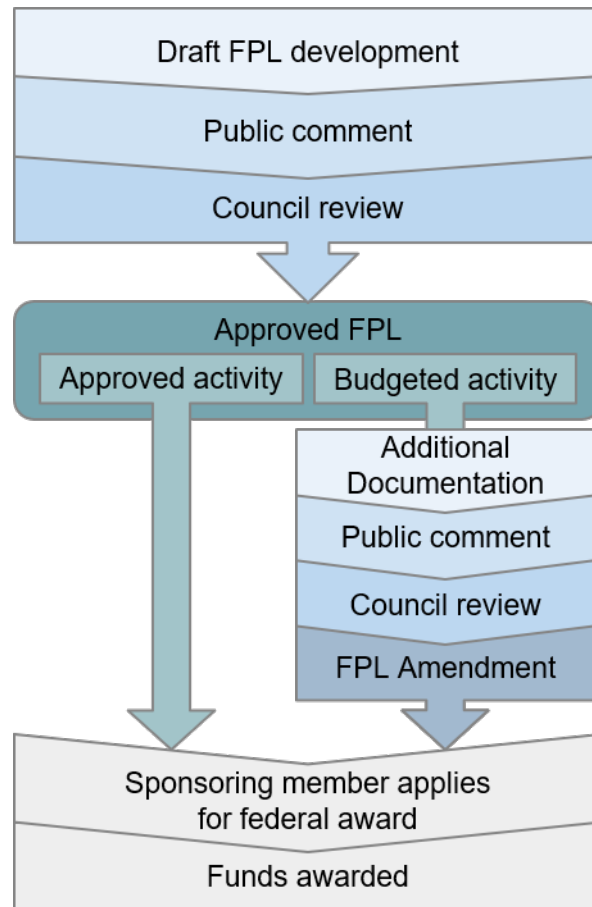


Figure 8. Differences in the process for awarding funds for approved vs budgeted activities in an FPL. The additional steps for budgeted activities include Council review and approval of materials required for an FPL amendment to change a budgeted activity to an approved activity. These materials include all documents necessary for compliance with all applicable environmental laws. In some cases, additional project information (e.g., specific location information, scope of work, final engineering and design plans) may also be required. As part of approving an FPL amendment, the Council provides an opportunity for the public to review and comment on the proposed action.

As of December 31, 2021, the Council has approved almost \$365M for Council-Selected Restoration Component activities either through approval of, or amendments to, FPLs. Approximately \$302M remains budgeted for potential future funding of priority activities. Of the approved funds, more than \$213M has been awarded to sponsoring members. Table 2 shows the breakdown of these funds for each approved FPL.

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FPL	Approved (approx.)	Budgeted (approx.)	Awarded (approx.)
2015 Initial FPL	\$176M	\$9M	\$170M
2017 CPS FPL	\$21.1M	N/A	\$20.8M
2020-21 FPL 3	\$167M	\$293M	\$22M

Table 2. Approved, budgeted, and awarded funds, by FPL, as of December 31, 2021.

Note: Approved and budgeted funds are distinct categories (see above). The total of the two reflects the amount included in each FPL.

2015 Initial Funded Priorities List

The 2015 Initial FPL is organized around ten watersheds/estuaries across the Gulf Coast region to concentrate and leverage available funds to address critical ecosystem needs in high priority locations. The Council's decisions were informed by stakeholder input and the best available science associated with a variety of factors, including widely-recognized environmental stressors, foundational investments needed to respond to those stressors, building on other funded conservation actions, and socioeconomic and cultural considerations. Activities were selected to provide near-term ecological results while also completing planning and science decision-support tools that may provide for future success.

2017 Commitment and Planning Support Funded Priorities List

The Council developed and approved the 2017 Commitment and Planning Support FPL (2017 CPS FPL) to support the Council in meeting its 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update commitments. Council members applied for and received limited funding through five-year awards, which are set to expire in mid-2023.

The goal of the 2017 CPS FPL was to foster coordination and collaboration among Council members, potential funding partners, and stakeholders. Council members use these funds to initiate and enhance collaboration, and to develop tools for exchanging ecosystem restoration and protection ideas for funding consideration in the next FPL. Council members held meetings throughout the Gulf to discuss these concepts and potential techniques to address environmental challenges and stressors. The culmination of this work thus far was the 2019 Planning Framework, [2020 FPL 3a](#), and [2021 FPL 3b](#). Members continue to use these funds to collaborate with one another, other funding partners, and stakeholders as they continue the work required to finalize their awards under these FPLs and, in the case of approved programs for which specific projects are not yet determined, to engage stakeholders in soliciting project ideas. More details regarding the purpose, allowed uses of, and early results of the funding may be found in the CPS Evaluation section of this document.

2020-21 Funded Priorities List 3

Approved a little more than one year apart, 2020 FPL 3a and 2021 FPL 3b provide funding for priority ecosystem restoration activities throughout the Gulf of Mexico. The activities in 2020-21 FPLs 3a and 3b build upon investments made in the 2015 Initial FPL. With this phased FPL 3, the Council continues to invest in the goals *Restore and Conserve Habitat* and *Restore Water Quality and Quantity* that were prioritized in the 2015 Initial FPL, as well as the *Enhance Community Resilience* goal. These goals are considered to be the “primary” goals, and the approved activities are designed to achieve those goals directly. The fourth Council-Selected Restoration Component goal, *Replenish and Protect Living Coastal and Marine Resources*, is a “secondary” goal of many of the approved activities. For example, by restoring and conserving habitat, the fish and wildlife that rely upon that habitat for food and shelter will also benefit.

2020 FPL 3a includes two large-scale ecosystem restoration projects: one in Alabama and the other in Louisiana. 2021 FPL 3b includes an additional 20 activities to address additional ecosystem needs across the Gulf coast region. The Council applied the 2019 Planning Framework, public comment, best available science determinations and internal administrative procedures to support its funding decisions.

Of particular note, 2021 FPL 3b contains many programs intended to address large-scale ecosystem problems that result in water quality impairment, coastal habitat loss and degradation, and coastal resilience challenges through the implementation of specific projects within those programs. For some programs, specific projects were not identified at the time 2021 FPL 3b was finalized. Rather, the FPL describes the priority issues that the programs aim to address in order to meet specified goals and objectives, the Planning Framework approaches that will be utilized, the decision processes that will be or have been followed to identify projects over time, and the metrics that will be used to determine whether the programs are meeting their stated goals and objectives. The Council believes that selecting and implementing projects within these programs will allow for a more systematic approach to addressing ecosystem-level problems within high priority watersheds. The Council also anticipates that by approving funds for these priority programs, additional partners may become interested over time.

As noted above, activities that are budgeted in an FPL can be approved via a Council vote after all applicable environmental laws have been addressed and the Council has provided an opportunity for public comment. In the case of some 2021 FPL 3b programs, additional project-specific information will also be needed prior to a Council vote.

Ecological Benefits

Figure 9 shows the total Council-Selected Restoration Component funds approved or budgeted for activities relating to its Comprehensive Plan objectives.

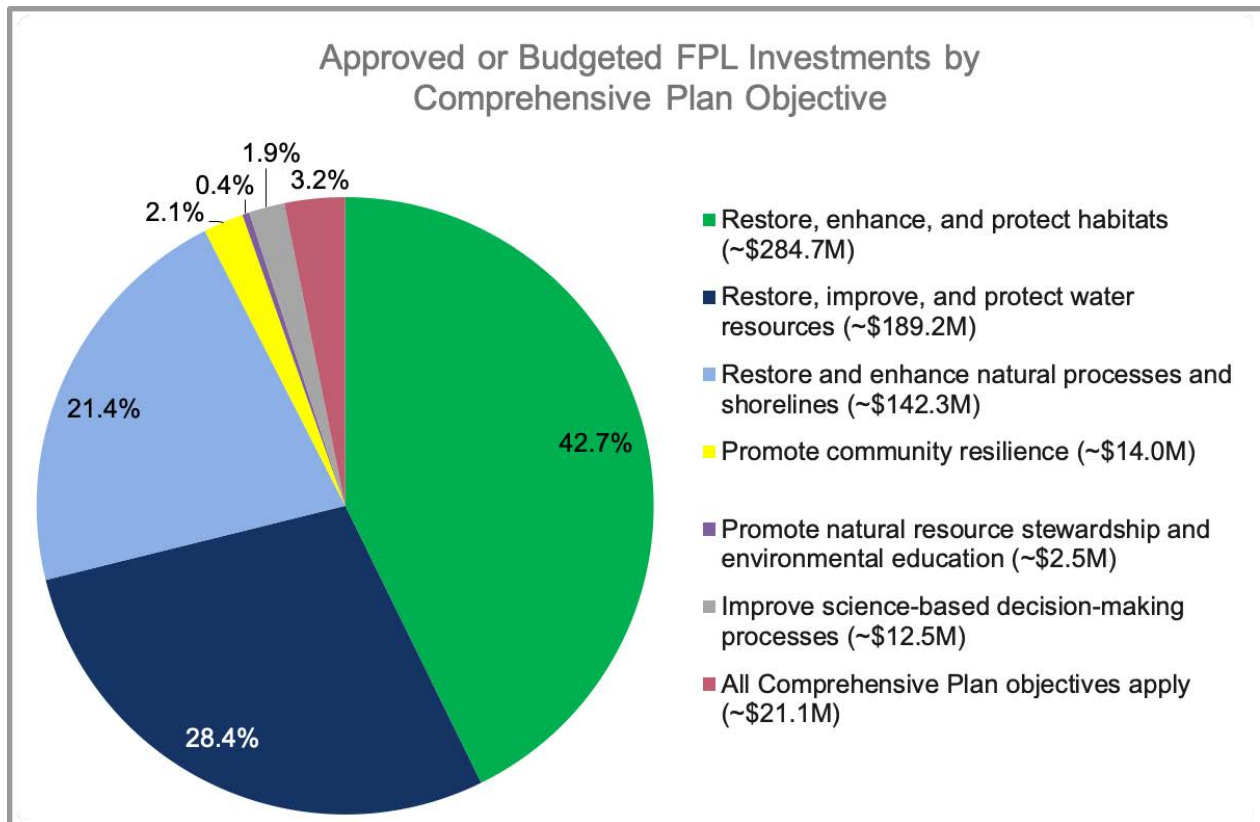


Figure 9. Approved or budgeted funds in the 2015 Initial FPL, 2017 CPS FPL, 2020 FPL 3a, and 2021 FPL 3b by Comprehensive Plan objective.

Recognizing that healthy habitats and improved water quality also benefit commercially and recreationally important fish and wildlife species while increasing the resilience of communities that rely on them, the Council has focused its investments on *Restoring, enhancing, and protecting key coastal habitats*; *Restoring, improving and protecting water resources*; and *Restoring and enhancing natural processes and shorelines*. The Council also recognizes the intimate ties between human communities and healthy ecosystems, and therefore is also directly investing in the objective to *Promote community resilience*. To ensure that the best available science continues to be infused into its work, the Council has also invested in *Improving science-based decision-making processes*. Recognizing the importance of education and training the next generation of ecosystem conservationists, the Council also invested in activities to *Promote natural resource stewardship and environmental education*. In this way, all seven of the Comprehensive Plan objectives are being addressed, either directly or indirectly.

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Although the 2019 Planning Framework priority approaches were developed after the 2015 Initial FPL in order to support development of 2020-21 FPL 3, they are also useful for communicating the Council’s anticipated activities across all FPLs. Combined, these FPLs utilize all five 2019 Planning Framework approaches (Figure 10). While the 2019 Planning Framework did not include approaches for science-based decision-making or natural resource stewardship, activities for which these are the primary Comprehensive Plan objectives are also identified in Figure 10, as these investments support all approaches.

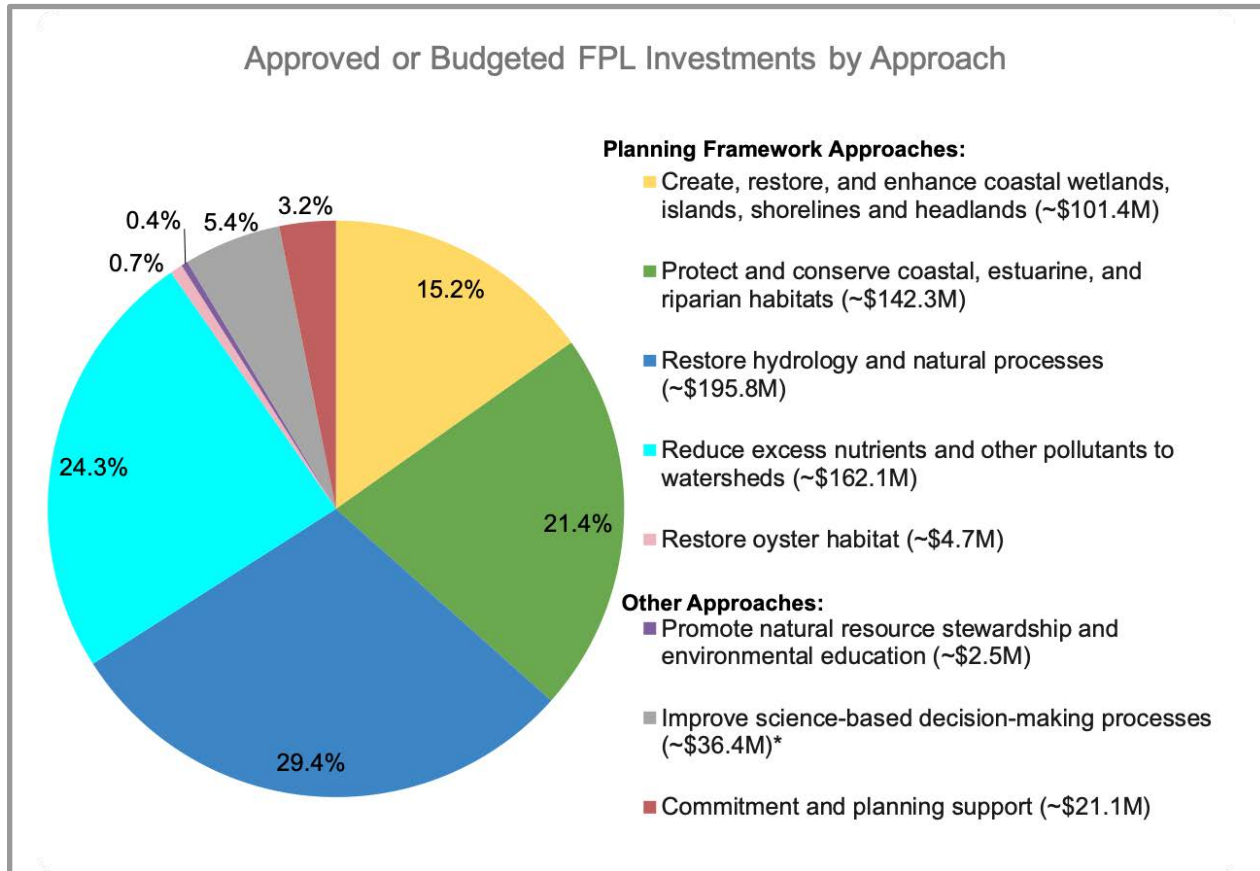


Figure 10. 2015 Initial FPL, 2017 CPS FPL, 2020 FPL 3a, and 2021 FPL 3b funds by primary approach. *Note: The “Improve science-based decision-making processes approach” is sometimes used to support other primary objectives. For example, in the 2015 Initial FPL, some monitoring activities were funded to primarily benefit the “Restore, enhance, and protect habitats” objective.*

With these investments, the Council has made significant progress toward realizing the intended benefits. Figures 11-12 show a subset of the project metrics that members are monitoring and the progress being made relative to the anticipated targets. These data are preliminary, and will be updated as projects are completed. Even though projects are still underway, the data do reflect the progress the Council is making in meeting its vision of a healthy and productive Gulf ecosystem.

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It should be noted that most habitat acquisition, conservation, and restoration activities also have a direct connection to improving water quality and quantity. These investments also support research and planning, monitoring activities, outreach and education, and provide economic benefits in support of the Council's goal to *Restore and Revitalize the Gulf Economy*.

A few highlights— through Council-Selected Restoration Component funded activities, the Council members have achieved:

- Acquired almost 8,000 acres of land
- Restored over 2,000 acres of wetlands and 6,400 acres of non-wetland areas
- Improved management practices on over 36,000 acres through Best Management Practices (BMPs) and enrolled more than 350 people to implement BMPs
- Reached over 4,600 people through outreach, training, or technical assistance activities
- Engaged more than 1,700 users through online activities
- Improved science-based decision-making processes by completing 27 studies to inform management and monitoring over 13,000 acres across the Gulf

The results included here represent initial outputs of the Council's investments, and will increase as the Council continues to implement activities across the Gulf. Using the organizational structure of the 2019 Planning Framework, as supported by the Council's revised [Observational Data Plan \(ODP\) Guidelines](#), the Council continues to improve its strategies for evaluating the results of its investments. This information also may inform the need to adapt current or future projects to enhance ecological outcomes. The Council remains committed to this approach for continuing to improve the science it uses to inform, evaluate, and report on the success of its work over time.

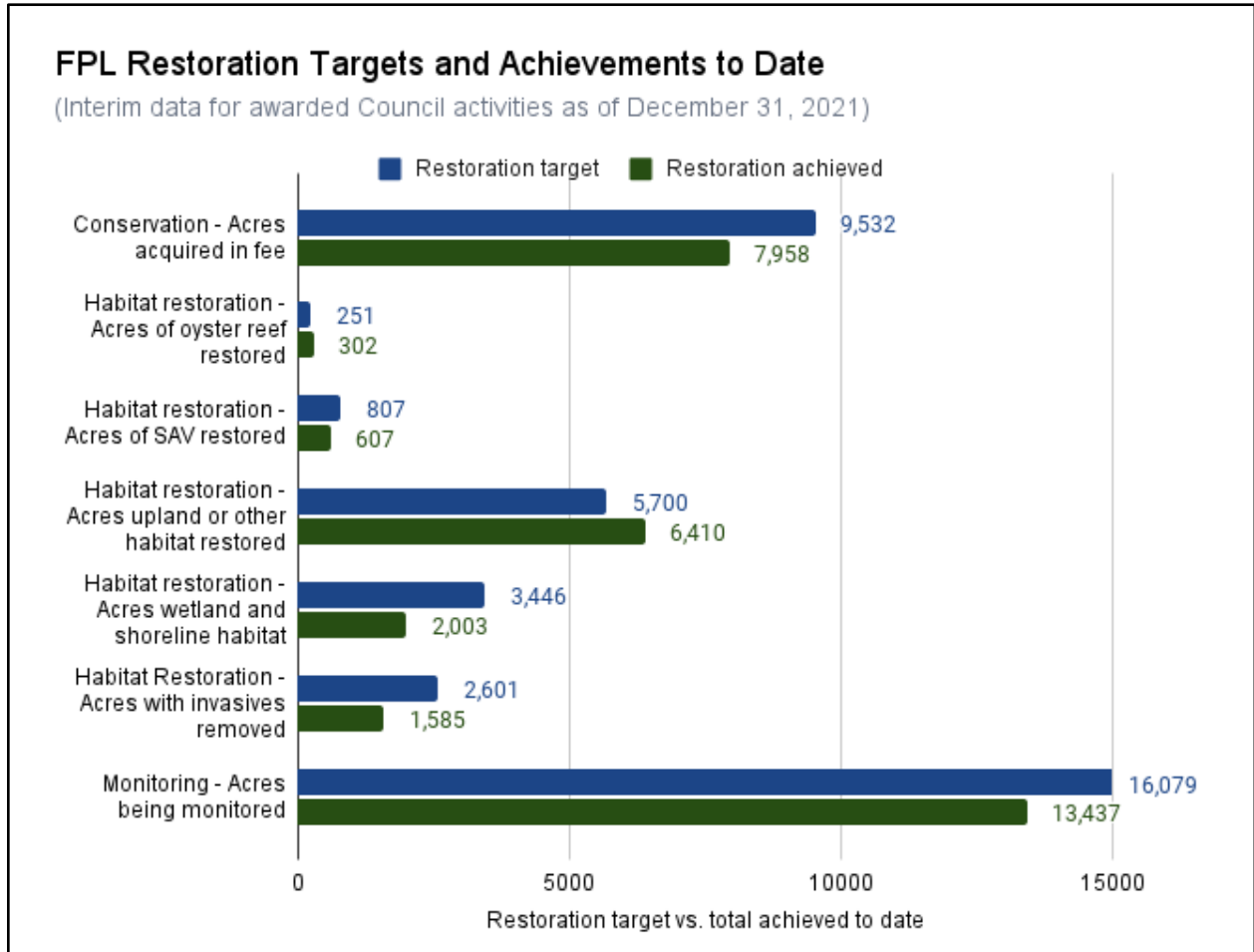


Figure 11. Reported restoration targets and achievements for awarded Council activities. Data shown as “achieved” are based on approved performance reports as of December 31, 2021. Achievements shown are only a subset of metrics being tracked by the Council and represent metrics for which sufficient reporting has been completed to date to demonstrate progress. *Note: Numbers shown are preliminary and targets not yet met may reflect that most FPL projects are still in progress. It does not mean that targets will not be achieved with the completion of all projects.*

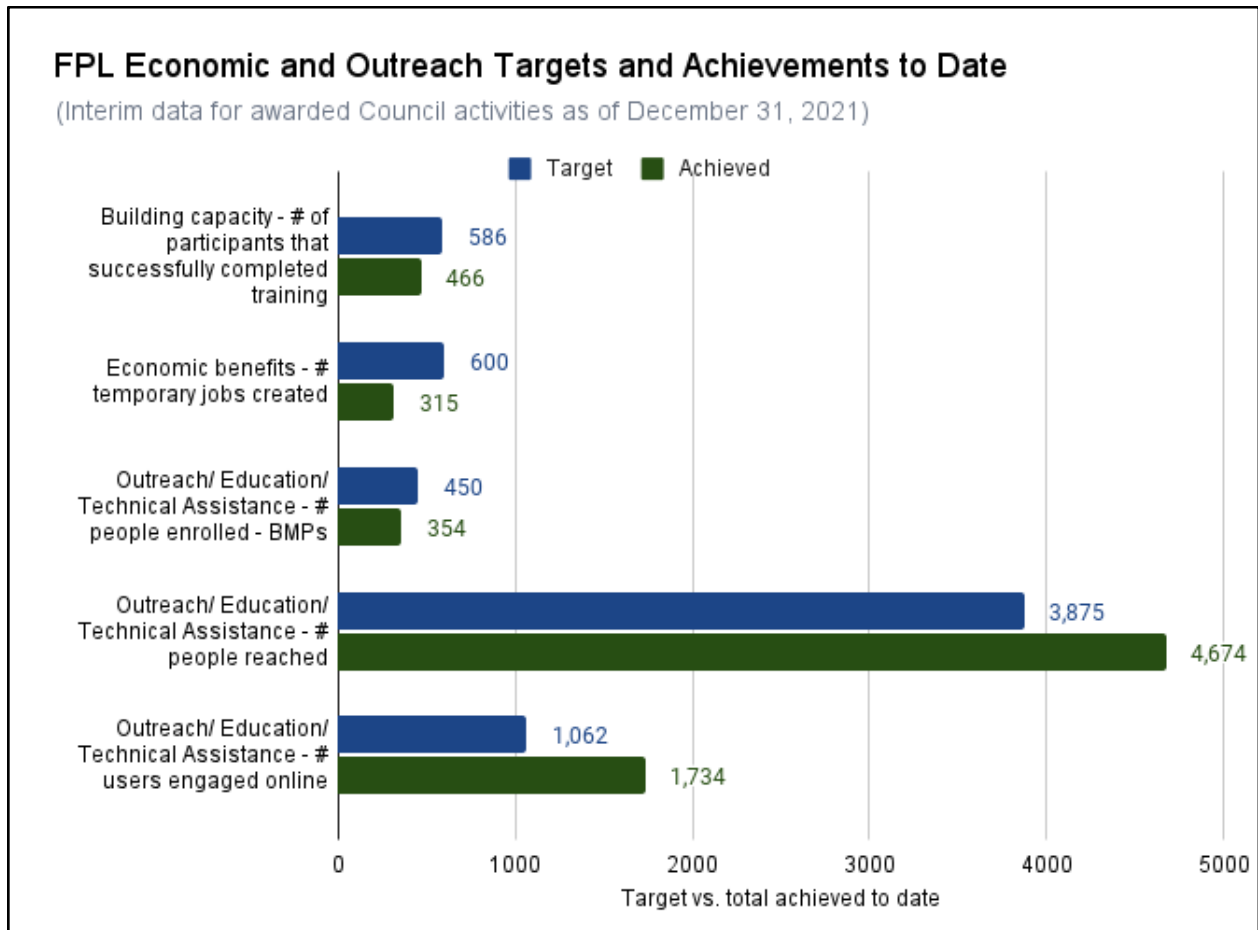


Figure 12. Reported economic and outreach targets and achievements for awarded Council activities. Data shown as “achieved” are based on approved performance reports as of December 31, 2021. Achievements shown are only a subset of metrics being tracked by the Council and represent metrics for which sufficient reporting has been completed to date to demonstrate progress. *Note: Numbers shown are preliminary and targets not yet met may reflect that most FPL projects are still in progress. It does not mean that targets will not be achieved with the completion of all projects.*

The metrics reported in the figures above are only a subset of the metrics being tracked by the Council, and represent metrics for which sufficient reporting has been completed to demonstrate progress. Members are also reporting on more foundational projects that are characterized as planning, monitoring, and research. Among others, metrics that members may report for such projects include the number of restoration or monitoring plans developed, and the number of studies completed or tools developed to help inform management decisions. Many of these projects are still underway and achievements will be reported at their completion.

Commitment and Planning Support - Summary of Activities and Evaluation of Effectiveness

In the [2017 CPS FPL](#), the Council stated its intention to review the effectiveness of these funds in meeting the Council's [Comprehensive Plan](#) commitments in Year 4 of the CPS awards, and to consider whether to continue funding for CPS FPL activities beyond the initial five-year period. The 2017 CPS FPL awards were made in mid-2018. Since 2022 is Year 4 of the awards, the Council has completed its evaluation of the effectiveness of the first three years of funding in supporting the Council's commitments, as described herein.

Commitment and Planning Support FPL Evaluation of Effectiveness

With an eye toward improving the development process and overall quality of ecosystem restoration proposals, members developed a list of allowable activities included in the FPL that described how CPS funds could be used to support collaboration and meet the commitments of the Comprehensive Plan (Figure 13). These included planning and collaboration activities to develop project and program concepts to be considered in the next FPL, conducting environmental compliance coordination and related activities, and developing applications for funding of the FPL-approved activities. Members also used funds for the necessary staffing and travel required to conduct this work. Additionally, members used funds for evaluation activities to determine the impact of the Council's FPL projects and programs and inform adaptive management for future funding decisions.

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Allowable Activity Category	Specific Activity within Category
Planning and Collaboration to develop conceptual, pre-proposal submission options for the next FPL	Intra- and inter-state and/or federal agency planning to develop proposals
	Intra-member planning to develop proposals, including those requiring multiple agency contributions (state and federal)
	Development of outreach mechanisms and conducting public engagement activities associated with developing FPL proposals
	Technical meetings or focus groups related to FPL proposal development
	FPL project scoping, environmental compliance coordination, and technical assistance in support of FPL proposal development
	Develop FPL, review and develop public comments responses
Preparation and submission of proposals in accordance with FPL submission guidelines	
Staffing in support of Council-Selected Restoration Component planning, collaboration, pre-submission environmental compliance coordination, and meeting other commitments from the Comprehensive Plan	
Travel Expenses related to Council-Selected Restoration Component project or program development	
Preparation of award applications for funding of FPL-approved activities	
Evaluation of the impact of FPL activities to support adaptive management for future funding decisions.	

Figure 13. Categories of activities that members are allowed to support with 2017 CPS FPL funding. The 2017 CPS FPL lists several specific activities under the allowable activity category, *Planning and Collaboration to develop conceptual, pre-proposal submission options for the next FPL*. This category and associated activities are highlighted in blue. Other stand-alone categories of allowable CPS activities are highlighted in green.

In accordance with 2017 CPS FPL reporting requirements, members submit annual reports describing allowable activities undertaken within the scope of the award. This Year 4 evaluation considered the types of allowable activities that members reported in Years 1-3. The fundamental success of the 2017 CPS FPL program and the members' use of these funds is reflected in the quality of the ecosystem restoration proposals submitted by the members through collaborative processes and, ultimately, the projects and programs included in [2020-21 FPL 3](#).

In Year 1 (2018-2019) and Year 2 (2019-2020) of the awards, members used their CPS FPL funds for collaborative work in the conceptualization of FPL 3. To increase transparency in decision-making and communication of priorities to potential funding partners and the public, members used a portion of these funds to develop the [2019 Planning Framework](#). This led to the recognition that developing FPL 3 in two phases would allow them to take advantage of partnering opportunities and realize greater ecological benefits. In Year 3 of the awards (2020-2021), members were engaged in the collaborative process to develop 2020-21 FPL 3.

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Members reported on their activities as part of this collaborative process each year. Activities in two general areas, FPL-focused stakeholder engagement and intra-Council collaboration, comprised much of this work. Together, these actions benefited both the public by allowing direct communication with the members, and the members by facilitating the receipt of information to better inform their restoration ideas.

Some highlights of the collaborative activities and the outcomes of those activities include:

- **FPL-focused stakeholder engagement**
 - **Individual member-led engagement:** Some members used funds to meet with stakeholders in their region to discuss priorities and solicit restoration ideas. This included creation of supporting materials such as graphics, questionnaires and surveys, informational handouts, and other visual aids for use in presenting ideas about projects that may be considered for funding in future FPLs. Several states used 2017 CPS FPL funds to conduct meetings, referred to as “summits,” where the public was presented with updates on *Deepwater Horizon* restoration efforts through current restoration projects and the announcement of new projects for future funding. Another communication tool being used by members is the maintenance of state-based coastal restoration websites. In addition to the Council’s website, www.restorethegulf.gov, these state websites are resources for the public to gather information on restoration in their area of interest as well as implementation of the [RESTORE Act](#).
 - **Public Comment Periods for Draft Documents:** As part of finalizing each FPL, the Council holds public comment periods that are accompanied by Council-hosted webinars and in-person meetings. In developing [2020 FPL 3a](#), two live public webinars were held on the opening day of the public comment period. Additionally, two in-person meetings were held, one in each state where the proposed projects would be implemented. In developing [2021 FPL 3b](#), two live public webinars were held on opening day. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Council chose to host virtual public meetings for the 2021 FPL 3b public comment period in lieu of in-person meetings to communicate the proposed restoration activities within each of the Gulf Coast States. Member sponsors of proposed activities included in these FPLs participated in associated meetings to support communication of their activities and to help answer questions.

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- **Intra-Council collaboration**

- **Member-to-member meetings:** At different points during the 2020-21 FPL 3 development process, members gathered in small groups to brainstorm on restoration ideas and priorities across the Gulf, and to determine whether there might be any funding partnering opportunities that could be leveraged to create stronger proposals. Some members also established state-based work groups to provide technical assistance, and developed partnerships between states and federal entities to assist with environmental compliance activities.
- **Pre-proposal Council meetings:** During Year 2, members dedicated several two-day Council meetings to discuss FPL project and program ideas as a full group, in order to gauge interest and strengthen the quality of the concepts prior to developing proposals.
- **Internal Best Available Science (BAS) Review Panel:** This panel was convened after completion of external BAS reviews of FPL 3 proposals by external experts. It leveraged technical expertise across the member agencies in reviewing and responding to these reviews. Responsive to both public comments and Comprehensive Plan commitments, the BAS review process for FPL 3 was enhanced with the inclusion of the internal BAS panel review, which enabled collaborative discussions of project interactions, synergies, benefits, and risks.
- **Environmental compliance efficiencies:** In order to strengthen the quality and general feasibility of proposals, members used funds to conduct pre-consultation environmental compliance coordination. Through this collaborative process, members determined that existing documentation held by a federal member could be used to meet National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements on some 2021 FPL 3b programs. This expedited funding approvals for certain projects and programs, and avoided both potential process and documentation duplication.
- **Council FPL decision-making:** As informed by the internal and external reviews, public input, and funding availability, the Council determined which proposals would be selected for inclusion in 2020-21 draft FPLs 3a and 3b, subject to further public review and comment, as appropriate. The decision-making process was enhanced due to the quality and breadth of information that was compiled through activities supported with 2017 CPS FPL Funds.

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- **Leveraging Member Agency expertise:** Members used funds to support their staffs' time to engage in multiple standing internal workgroups related to public engagement, monitoring, and environmental compliance.
 - **Public Engagement Workgroup:** Many of the collaborative, FPL-focused public engagement and outreach activities described above were informed through participation in a monthly meeting of a Council workgroup focused on supporting the Council's public engagement activities. Public engagement experts from each member agency provided technical input to improve the clarity of the Council's messages.
 - **Council Monitoring and Assessment Workgroup:** This workgroup, composed of technical experts from each of the member agencies, supports the Council in meeting its commitments to monitoring and adaptive management, and the use of BAS. Recent accomplishments include updating the Council's guidelines for developing and implementing project and program Observational Data Plans, including recommendations on appropriate metrics, monitoring methodologies, and data management procedures.
 - **Gulf Coast Interagency Environmental Restoration Workgroup (GCIERWG):** This workgroup, as described previously, began as a partnership of federal agencies and recently expanded to include state member experts, thus greatly increasing intra-Council collaborative support for environmental compliance reviews. This expansion has connected Council members' staff with one another, establishing a strong foundation for future collaborative approaches for environmental review supporting 2020-21 FPL 3 and future FPLs.

Over the first three years of the CPS FPL awards, members also invested in work that would support additional evaluation and adaptive management of FPL activities. The products from this work are valuable to ongoing Council collaboration. [Links to information about these resources](#) can be found on the Council's website. This work includes:

- Engaging scientists from across the Gulf to develop geospatial layers and maps that highlight the location and severity of known or emerging environmental stressors and how these relate to essential ecological services.

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- Creating a story map and an interactive web-accessible dashboard to communicate similarities in state restoration objectives and management priorities, as identified through a review of state management plans and [2015 Initial FPL](#) projects.
- Developing an inventory of existing data for offshore sand resources in the Gulf. This database may be used to inform the availability of this important resource for future projects such as beach and barrier island restoration.
- Maintaining the [Gulf Coast Monitoring and Assessment Portal](#), initiated through a 2015 Initial FPL award, which is an inventory of existing water quality and habitat monitoring and mapping resources across the Gulf of Mexico.

Conclusions and Next Steps for CPS FPL Funding

The Council is a unique federal agency, given its membership and structure. Being composed of five states and six federal agencies, there are tremendous opportunities to leverage expertise and resources for benefits far greater than what could be achieved individually. The 2017 CPS FPL approved funding amounting to 1.44 percent of the total funds available (excluding interest) for the Council-Selected Restoration Component. With these funds, the Council was able to more fully realize the potential of its interagency structure and to effectively leverage the diverse expertise and views of its members and stakeholders.

Prior to approval of the 2017 CPS FPL, no designated funding source existed to support Council member efforts to plan and coordinate restoration activities under the Council-Selected Restoration Component. Previously, Council members had to rely upon other sources of funding to support their involvement in FPL development and updates to the Council's [Comprehensive Plan](#). The 2017 CPS FPL provided Council members with funding from the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill settlement to support meeting the Council's commitments.

With these funds the Council was able to make strides towards realizing its Comprehensive Plan commitments to transparent and collaborative decision-making in support of a healthy and productive Gulf ecosystem. Among the outcomes was an improved FPL development process. Members collaborated to strengthen the technical rigor of proposals considered for funding; enhanced their efficiency in the FPL development process, including finding efficiencies in meeting their environmental compliance requirements; and found opportunities to leverage resources and funding across agencies and programs.

The decisions made regarding using a phased approach to developing 2020-21 FPL 3 as well as the specific projects and programs approved in them were informed through the 2017 CPS FPL-funded early engagement with stakeholders, increased intra-Council collaboration, and the leveraging of technical expertise among Council member agencies throughout the process.

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From an ecological perspective, some of the strengths of this phased FPL include:

- Large-scale projects that leverage resources with other agencies
- Programs that seek watershed-level benefits for Gulf resources
- Restoration initiatives that leverage funds with other government programs for greater benefits

The Council concludes that the use of a small portion of its total Council-Selected Restoration Component funds to advance its Comprehensive Plan commitments has successfully met the intended purpose. As a next step, the Council will consider whether it will extend this funding beyond the initial five years to continue to use the Gulf Coast Restoration Trust Fund (Trust Fund) to support this important component of the Council's work. If the Council decides to pursue developing another CPS FPL, it will review the list of allowable activities and the total funding amounts allowed in the 2017 CPS FPL, and consider whether revisions are warranted. As is a regular part of the Council's procedures, the draft FPL would be released for public review and comment prior to finalization.

Spill Impact Component - State Expenditure Plans

While the Council selects and funds projects and programs to restore the ecosystem with Council-Selected Restoration Component funds, the Spill Impact Component funds are invested in projects, programs, and activities developed by each Gulf Coast State (or designated state entity) and identified in approved State Expenditure Plans (SEPs). The [RESTORE Act](#) allocates 30 percent of the Gulf Coast Restoration Trust Fund (Trust Fund) to the states under a formula established by the Council through a regulation, and spent according to individual SEPs.

Each state has developed a SEP describing how it will disburse the amounts allocated to it under the Spill Impact Component. These SEPs can be, and have been, amended to add projects and programs and/or modify existing approved SEP activities. These projects and programs are implemented through grants to the states in a manner that is consistent with the requirements of the RESTORE Act as well as the goals and objectives of the Comprehensive Plan.

Planning Assistance for Developing SEPs

In August 2014, the Council published an Interim Final Rule in the [Federal Register](#) for Gulf Coast States and the Florida Gulf Consortium to receive funding for development of SEPs. The Final [RESTORE Act Spill Impact Component Planning Allocation Rule](#) was published on January 13, 2015 and provides access to up to five percent of the funds available to each state under the Spill Impact Component for SEP development.

Funding Allocations

On September 29, 2015, the Council published a draft Spill Impact Component Allocation regulation in the Federal Register for a 30-day public comment period. The draft regulation was published pursuant to the [RESTORE Act](#) requirement that the Council establish by regulation a formula, implementing the criteria set forth in 33 U.S.C. § 1321(t)(3)(A)(ii) for allocation of Spill Impact Component funds and disbursed to each state, that is based on a weighted average of the following three criteria:

- 40 percent based on the proportionate number of miles of shoreline in each Gulf Coast State that experienced oiling on or before April 10, 2011, compared to the total number of miles of shoreline that experienced oiling as a result of the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill.
- 40 percent based on the inverse proportion of the average distance from the mobile offshore drilling unit *Deepwater Horizon* at the time of the explosion to the nearest and farthest point of the shoreline that experienced oiling of each Gulf Coast State.

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- 20 percent based on the average population in the 2010 decennial census of coastal counties bordering the Gulf of Mexico within each Gulf Coast State.

On December 9, 2015, the RESTORE Council [voted to approve the final Spill Impact Component Allocation Rule](#), and published the final [RESTORE Act Spill Impact Component Allocation Rule](#) in the Federal Register on December 15, 2015. The RESTORE Act Spill Impact Component Allocation Rule became effective April 4, 2016 when the Federal court in Louisiana approved and finalized the [Consent Decree](#).

Using the formula and information set forth in this rule, the allocation of Spill Impact Component funds among the five Gulf Coast States is:

- Alabama – 20.40 percent
- Florida – 18.36 percent
- Louisiana – 34.59 percent
- Mississippi – 19.07 percent
- Texas – 7.58 percent

Updated SEP Guidelines

On March 17, 2016, the Council updated the [Oil Spill Impact Component: State Expenditure Plan \(SEP\) Guidelines](#) that describe the required elements of a SEP, the process for submitting a SEP, and the standards by which the Council Chair will evaluate the SEP. These guidelines also describe the requirements for a Planning SEP authorized by the [RESTORE Act Spill Impact Component Planning Allocation Final Rule](#). Once approved, [SEPs](#), including [Planning SEPs](#), can be found on the Council's website.

Spill Impact Component - Investments to Date

The Council has approved [State Expenditure Plans](#) (SEPs) for all five states, as well as associated amendments to several of these SEPs. As of December 31, 2021, the Council has approved over \$1B and awarded approximately \$321M through grants to implement specific projects and programs described in the SEPs.

The investments support six of the Comprehensive Plan objectives as implemented through a variety of [2019 Planning Framework](#) priority approaches. Figure 14 shows the awarded funds relative to those objectives. Recognizing that healthy habitats and improved water quality also benefit commercially and recreationally important fish and wildlife species while increasing the

resilience of communities that rely on them, the Council has focused its investments on restoring, enhancing, and protecting key coastal habitats; and restoring, improving and protecting water resources. The states have distributed funds across all other objectives in smaller amounts to directly address those objectives as well.

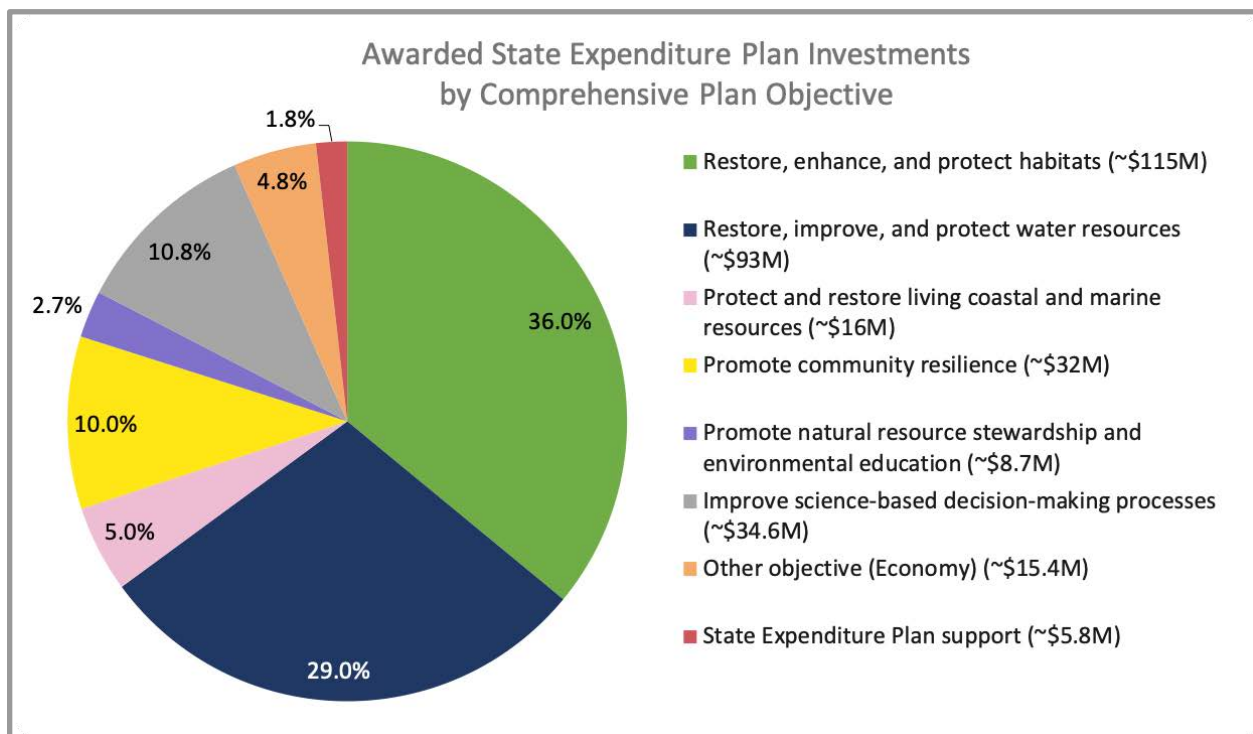


Figure 14. State Expenditure Plans awarded funds by Comprehensive Plan objectives. This figure includes funds awarded to all 5 states as of December 31, 2021. *Note: Unlike for the Council-Selected Restoration Component figures, this figure shows only funds that have actually been awarded to states through grants. State Expenditure Plans may be regularly amended to add, change, or remove projects in order to adapt to changing needs within each state over the lifetime of the program. Therefore, funds for activities approved in SEPs, but not yet awarded to states, are not shown.*

Although the 2019 Planning Framework was developed with a focus on the Council-Selected Restoration Component, categorization by Planning Framework approach for SEP activities is instructive for communicating funding priorities. Figure 15 shows Spill Impact Component funding through December 31, 2021 by the Planning Framework approaches. While the 2019 Planning Framework did not include approaches for science-based decision-making or natural resource stewardship, activities for which these are the primary Comprehensive Plan objectives are also identified in Figure 15, as these investments support all approaches. In addition, some SEP funding has been directed at restoring and revitalizing the Gulf economy and for SEP planning. These funds are identified in Figure 15 as well.

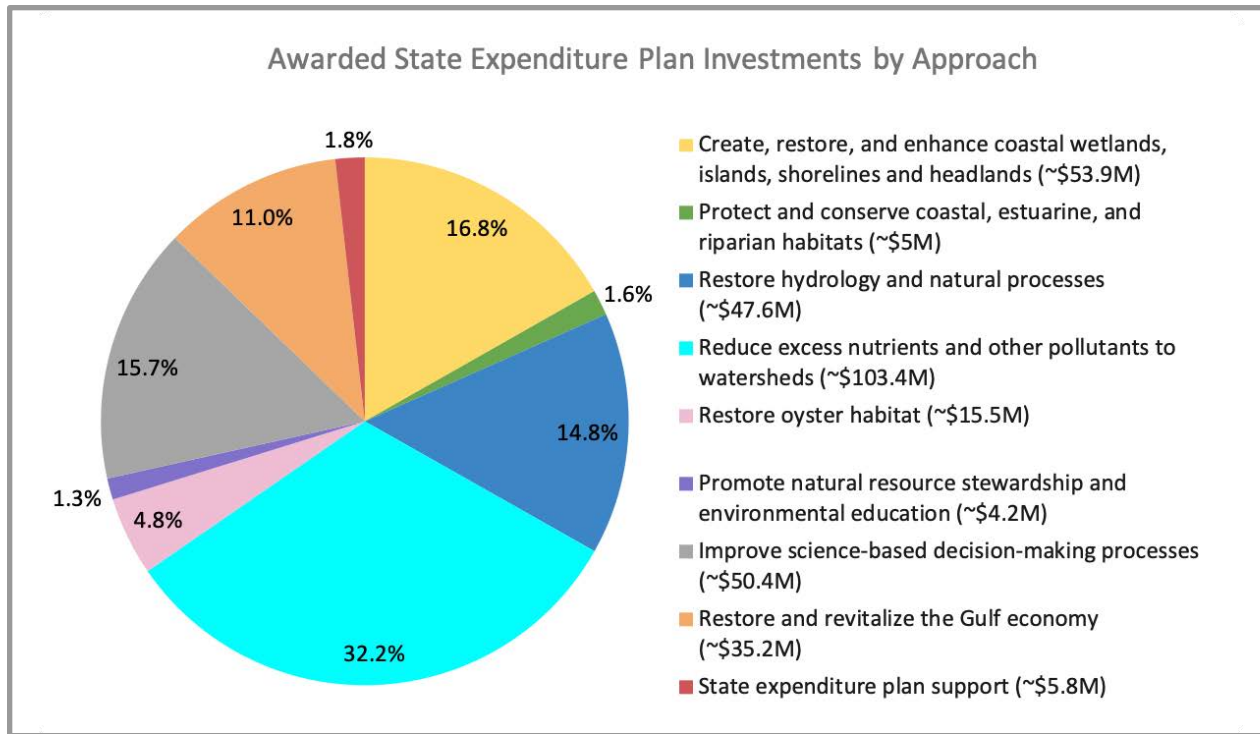


Figure 15. State Expenditure Plans awarded funds by primary 2019 Planning Framework approach. This figure includes funds awarded to all 5 states as of December 31, 2021.

Within each state, members have focused on their highest priority investments, taking into consideration ecosystem and infrastructure needs as well as investments from other funding sources.

Each state's focus is summarized below, including funding decisions as of December 31, 2021:

- Alabama** - The [Alabama SEP](#) is administered by the Alabama Gulf Coast Recovery Council, which is chaired by Alabama's Governor, co-chaired by the Director of the Alabama State Port Authority, and includes the Chairman of the Baldwin County Commission, the President of the Mobile County Commission, and the Mayors of Bayou La Batre, Dauphin Island, Fairhope, Gulf Shores, Mobile, and Orange Beach. The [RESTORE Act](#) allocates \$327,043,127 in Spill Impact Component funding to Alabama. To date, the Council has approved the initial Alabama SEP and a planning SEP for a total of \$132,695,727 in approved Spill Impact Component funding. As of December 31, 2021, almost \$113M has been awarded to Alabama to implement projects described in the SEP.

The Alabama SEP includes 30 separate activities across the coast of Alabama, including funds for SEP planning. Approximately 65% of the funds approved in the Alabama SEP are allocated to ecosystem restoration and protection, 8% to improving State parks,

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18% to infrastructure, 6% to planning assistance, and the remaining amounts to promotion of tourism and Gulf seafood. The Alabama Gulf Coast Recovery Council will amend the Alabama SEP to add more projects and/or make changes to approved projects, as appropriate.

- **Florida** - The [Florida SEP](#) is administered by the Gulf Consortium, a public entity comprising Florida's 23 Gulf Coast counties, from Escambia County in the western panhandle to Monroe County on the southern tip of Florida. The [RESTORE Act](#) allocates \$294,338,815 in Spill Impact Component funding to Florida. The total amount approved in the Florida SEP and amendments is roughly equal to Florida's total SEP allocation. As of December 31, 2021, more than \$33M has been awarded to the Gulf Consortium to implement projects described in the SEP.

The Florida SEP and associated amendments include 72 separate activities across the 23 Gulf Coast counties, including funds for planning and administrative activities by the Gulf Consortium. Approximately 68% of the funds approved in the Florida SEP and amendments are allocated to ecosystem restoration and protection projects, 17% to infrastructure (including flood protection), 13% to promoting Gulf tourism, and the remaining amounts to other eligible activities.¹ The Gulf Consortium continues to amend its SEP to change funding amounts for approved projects, add new projects, and remove others.

- **Louisiana** - The [Louisiana SEP](#) is administered by the Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority. The [RESTORE Act](#) allocates \$554,530,479 in Spill Impact Component funding to Louisiana. To date, the Council has approved the initial Louisiana SEP and one amendment, for a total of \$551,500,000 in approved Spill Impact Component funding. These funds will be allocated through 2031, and do not reflect the total amount available to be awarded at this time. As of December 31, 2021, more than \$101M has been awarded to Louisiana to implement projects and programs described in the SEP.

The Louisiana SEP and the associated amendment include eight separate projects and programs across the coast of Louisiana. Approximately 86% of the funds approved in the Louisiana SEP and the amendment are allocated to ecosystem restoration and protection, 14% to planning assistance (all of these planning funds are allocated to the

¹ The RESTORE Act sets forth 11 eligible activities for Spill Impact Component funding. A Spill Impact Component project or program may align with more than one of these eligible activities, but must identify one primary eligible activity. These percentages are based on the primary eligible activity for each project and program.

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CPRA Adaptive Management Program), and 1% to flood protection infrastructure. Louisiana amends its SEP, as appropriate, to adjust funding for existing approved activities, and/or add new activities to the SEP.

- **Mississippi** - The [Mississippi SEP](#) is administered by the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality. The [RESTORE Act](#) allocates \$305,721,198 in Spill Impact Component funding to Mississippi. To date, the Council has approved the initial Mississippi SEP, three amendments, and a planning SEP, for a total of \$115,410,000 in approved Spill Impact Component funding. As of December 31, 2021, \$66M has been awarded to Mississippi to implement projects and programs described in the SEP.

The Mississippi SEP and associated amendments include 12 separate projects and programs across the coast of Mississippi. Approximately 95% of the funds approved in the Mississippi SEP and amendments are allocated to ecosystem restoration and protection and 5% to planning assistance. Mississippi periodically amends its SEP to increase funding for existing activities or add new activities, as appropriate.

- **Texas** - The [Texas SEP](#) is administered by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ). The [RESTORE Act](#) allocates \$121,518,966 in Spill Impact Component funding to Texas. To date, the Council has approved the initial Texas SEP, one amendment, and a planning SEP, for a total of \$31,771,908 in approved Spill Impact Component funding. As of December 31, 2021, almost \$8M has been awarded to Texas to implement the programs described in the SEP.

The Texas SEP and the associated amendment include four programs across the coast of Texas, along with planning funds for TCEQ. This SEP, which was developed to support recovery from Hurricane Harvey, currently provides funding for two of the four approved programs: \$7.8M for the *FY20 RESTORE Nature Based Tourism* program and \$24M for the *Shoreline & Beach Restoration* program. Approximately 74% of the funds approved in the Texas SEP and the amendment are allocated to ecosystem restoration and protection, 25% to promotion of tourism, and 1% to planning assistance. Texas amends its SEP, as appropriate, to adjust funding for existing approved activities, or add new activities to the SEP.

Conclusions and Path Forward

The Council continues to build upon its commitments as described in this 2022 Comprehensive Plan Update to ensure that the Gulf's natural resources are sustainable and available for future generations. The Gulf restoration funds available now and in the future represent an unprecedented opportunity and responsibility for the Council and all the stakeholders in the Gulf Coast region.

In the coming months and years, the Council will focus its efforts on implementing the restoration activities already approved in FPLs and SEPs, as well as developing additional FPLs and amending SEPs as appropriate to address the goals and objectives in this Comprehensive Plan. It also will continue to collaborate among and between members, with other restoration partners, and with its stakeholders to fully leverage all available funds as effectively as possible to meet the Comprehensive Plan goals and objectives. The RESTORE Council will continue to leverage the expertise and resources available within each of the five state and six federal agency members for benefits far greater than could be achieved individually.

The ongoing involvement of the people who live, work, and play in the Gulf Coast region is critical to ensuring that these monies are used wisely and effectively. The Council thanks all who supported and participated in the Council's work to date. Your input continues to be essential as the Council moves forward with its mission to restore the Gulf.

Request for Public Comment and Next Steps

This draft 2022 Comprehensive Plan Update is available for a 46-day public review and comment period beginning April 21, 2022. The deadline for submitting public comments is 11:59 pm MT on June 6, 2022. During this time frame, the RESTORE Council is providing an overview of the draft document via live public webinars. Webinar recordings will be provided on the Council's website, www.restorethegulf.gov. The public can provide feedback using one of the following options:

- Go to www.restorethegulf.gov for an online link to the Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) site
- By email to restorecouncil@restorethegulf.gov
- By mail:
Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council
Attention: 2022 Comprehensive Plan Comments
500 Poydras Street, Suite 1117
New Orleans, LA 70130

The Council will review all comments received before the deadline and will develop a written response to comments. In finalizing the 2022 Comprehensive Plan Update, the Council will consider the public comments as it votes on whether or not to approve the Update. The final version of the 2022 Comprehensive Plan Update, the responses to public comments, and the results of the Council vote will be made available to the public via automatic updates.

The Council appreciates those stakeholders who are not only interested in Gulf restoration but also participate in the Council's restoration activities by offering comments during the public comment period. If you are interested in receiving notifications of upcoming webinars, public meeting or public comment periods, subscribe to receive the RESTORE Council's automatic email updates at www.restorethegulf.gov/contact-us and select the "Public Meetings and Public Comment Periods" category in addition to other categories of interest to you.