

**Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council
Public Meeting for Draft Comprehensive Plan Update**

Long Beach, MS – Sept. 26, 2016

Principals:

Justin Ehrenwerth (Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council), Ann Mills (Department of Agriculture), Gary Rikard (Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality), Marc Wyatt (Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality), John Bowie (Environmental Protection Agency), Jessica Kondel (Department of Commerce), Chris Pease (Department of Interior), Hank Burch (Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources)

Additional Support:

Buck Sutter, Alyssa Dausman, Ann Weaver, Kirsten Dorans, Homer Wilkes, Robbie Kroger, Kim Smith, Donna Lum, Gloria Tatum, Camille Smith, Robbie Wilbur, Toni Martin, Julie Daughdrill, LaTrina Williams, Coretta Jones, Teresa Ree, Wesley Kerr, Tabatha Baum, Melanie Green, Ray Eaton, Isih Sebuktekin, Melanie Green, Doug Upton, Natalie Segrest, Mike Freiman, Coen Perrot,

Coi Nguyen, Vietnamese Interpretation

The meeting started at 6:00 p.m. and lasted 71 minutes. There were approximately 50 people in attendance, not including Council representatives, staff and support.

Introductory remarks:

Gary Rikard

Justin Ehrenwerth provided a PowerPoint overview of the draft Comprehensive Plan Update.

Council Member representatives introduced themselves.

The public comment began at approximately 6:35 p.m. and lasted about 41 minutes.

Public comments (11 speakers):

Gilbert Ramsey, Military Veterans Association, Disabled Community:

I'm with Projects 1273. I'm introducing the International Society for Wheelchair Professionals Disabled Community. I'm introducing Coastal Management Fellowship with NOAA; Fellowship Literacy Program. I'm introducing Master Naturalist Program. I'm introducing higher learning education and the STEM program, assisted technology World Health Organization. I have done this since 2012. I have international recognition in the hospitality state. I'm also introducing the personalized platform, individualized educational program. Reached out to many international countries to initiate a platform to accommodate the disabled community appropriately for research capabilities and implementations of projects. We have this associated program with this introduction and I

have Military Veteran's Association; I've been invited to the Pentagon. I have a movie producer coming forth to do a movie as well. So we have this and Mr. Miller, Department of Resources, waiting for me to introduce it on the 20th in Hancock County. I got to come back down in 2010 and they write me a letter of interest, so I'm doing a PowerPoint presentation, Secretary of State, to handle appropriately for our best interests. To represent the hospitality state more appropriately. I have this and I have economic development. We bought a bottle-working company and have a contract with Sam's, Walmart, and all the commissaries. Will build homeless domiciles. What it is – the power to become a productive citizen; we are offering the disabled community. We are offering therapeutic, stimulating options for them, incorporating this vision. It's called Safe Harbor Adaptive Sports, the Navy recognizes it, adaptive sports, Paralympics. I'm initiating my personal chapter of a Paraplegic Fish Rodeo next to the VA. So I've had this association going and I'm very proud and honored to be here. Thank you very much for your attention and cooperation.

Senator Joseph Seymour (Mississippi State Senator), public:

Would you explain to the people about a project you started to help with the oyster industry and the island you're building to help with water quantity and quality in Bay Saint Louis? Will you also explain in these buckets what can be used for water quality and infrastructure and how all funding cannot be used to help every incident that the local communities have?

Gary Rikard's response: From a water quality standpoint, that's something that we are as a state are looking at to address from all the funding sources, whether that be from the RESTORE Act, NFWF or NRDA. We've got three main purposes: land acquisition, water quality, and restoring marine resources and it just so happens that water quality would also fit under bucket 2. We've got some projects out now, some studies that have been done on water quality. We have some others that are coming up that we will be announcing on November 15th and I know that you've talked to me individually and also with Marc and one of the things we're very interested in is trying to avoid beach advisories and/or closures in Mississippi and to look at projects that will address that. That may or may not happen under bucket 2 (it might be another funding source), but rest assured that it's something that we're looking at holistically and trying to address. In regard to the oyster project, I'm going to turn it over to Marc Wyatt, who is the director of our Office of Restoration.

Marc Wyatt's response: Hancock County Living Shoreline Project. That was under NRDA Early Restoration, Phase III. It is almost 6 miles of living shoreline, approximately 46 acres of oyster cultch or secondary productivity cultch that are being put out there and also approximately 46 acres of marsh that will be created. Construction on the living shoreline itself has started within the last couple of

weeks. It's in the first phase. Also, the cult for the secondary productivity has also started. It is an approximately \$50 million project.

Yolanda Ferguson, public:

What does RESTORE Council mean to y'all? Everybody in this room will agree that this is our home and this is our Gulf, and our backyard. I'm very concerned about our ecology and Gulf, because we've been waiting how many years for y'all? It isn't y'all's fault; you all had to wait for the money. But that toxic dispersant is still out there and because of it we don't have work and our fisherman are still being exposed to it. There are 5 different pots of the RESTORE Council. Who's held accountable to all these pots? Are you all held accountable? Is everyone on this board responsible? You give money to the states. Who's responsible for the money to the states? I've heard all kinds of ideas. We build a baseball stadium? We're supposed to get Internet access? How does that restore the Gulf? If we don't clean up this dispersant and you don't clean up your watersheds, what's going to happen when a hurricane brings that stuff back in here? You say geographic locations, well it really isn't a geographic location; all the water runs together. Every watershed works together, so if we have a Hurricane Katrina, that stuff is coming in on us. I've done a lot of research and I've really gotten into dispersants. It's not a pretty picture and it really scares me. I understand that we have to do the right thing. But I also understand we need to think about our future and our ecology. The water needs to be cleaned. I don't know how to do it. I just know it scares me. I would like the oil spill to be cleaned up, so we can go back to our business [such as for fisherman]. Because, at this rate, we don't have any business. And if we get this cleaned up, none of us will have to worry about it anymore. I don't want that back in on me because I've already experienced it with my family. I don't want to do it again. It's not fun. You have to see it to believe it. I did a lot of research to know how to save my family.

Joseph Ferguson, public:

I'm not sure, I've put in a couple of projects. I'm not sure what bucket they go in. The first time we this RESTORE act, I spoke hard on restoring the shrimp population here and across the Gulf of Mexico I've talked to our local DMR and they scratched their heads and looked at me strangely. Our shrimp population is not protected properly. I've mentioned this before. When I bring it forth, they we have to go by the law set forth in the 1970s. I say, yes you do, but what about changing these laws to properly protect shrimp instead of just haphazardly? They say they need science to back this up. Well, this is where my proposal comes in to fund science to prove what I'm saying. We have the possibility to have year-round shrimp in the Gulf, coming out of the estuaries, because we have commercial a fall shrimp and winter shrimp. But they're not protected at all. Another thing that I've hounded on for years is that this oil dispersant is still affecting the fisherman. It's still on their gear. I can testify to that because I handle it. It's obviously on their boats. I don't know what bucket that should come out of to be cleaned up. I think that should be cleaned up for

these folks that are exposed to this year after year. I met a young gentleman and his lymph node system is swelled up obviously from this dispersant. I told him the signs to look for and he got back to me this spring and said it's still there; I'm still feeling the effects from it. I talked to the scientists about it and they said all the tests we run are coming back negative, but maybe they aren't looking for it right. I don't know. Thank you.

Mike Murphy, The Nature Conservancy:

I'm a conservation biologist with The Nature Conservancy out of south Mississippi. I really appreciate the opportunity to speak. We are preparing detailed written comments on the plan and we will have that to you prior to the end date. First of all, we appreciate the hard work and cooperation of the Council in getting this revision done so quickly. It was an amazing job. We also support a lot of the specific changes in the plan. Most especially, we like the importance of the cooperation and coordination among agencies and funding sources that you're proposing. We like reaffirmation of the watershed-estuary approach and planning in restoration. We are already looking at some of these projects in Mississippi and the other states as well. We support the commitment to large-scale projects; we think this is absolutely the right way to go. We support the reliance on natural, ecological processes to restore and maintain ecosystem integrity. We appreciate your willingness to explore options to creative conservation funding. We really like your commitment to public engagement support. We are very supportive of your reliance on science-based decision making. Thanks again for the opportunity to speak and we look forward to working with the Council.

Howard Page, Gulf Restoration Network:

I also want to follow up on comments that were just made. I think you've done a really great job with transparency and outreach. I know this is going to be a long process but I really appreciate how much effort that must take. I really appreciate seeing someone from a neighboring state, from Louisiana here. That's really smart to show that that's the vision of the multifaceted approach to this that we're looking locally and globally out as far as all of the Gulf states. One thing I haven't heard that I'd like to repeat that has been in earlier conversations. As we're envisioning projects and we're presenting projects, to keep in mind that we need to have training and the work come from here on the coast as much as possible. We've always talked about Centers of Excellence, etc. and I know there are other efforts that are doing that. I want to have that be one of the pieces that we keep in mind as we're envisioning projects—to hopefully use as much local labor and training and to give as much knowledge from here as possible, to take advantage of what's going to be \$16 billion-plus of economic activity. On the projects themselves, I really like seeing that we're looking at water quality and quantity and that we're using science and I think that's really being done in a smart way. There have been a lot of good studies. I would like to ask as we are doing the transparency and outreach, something that I've said to some of the members on the board. I know there are firewalls between what you can do and other decisions that

are being made. When the RESTORE Act started, there were already a lot of projects that had been started. I would like to ask that we'd somehow inform people who are doing some projects that are maybe not wise (dams on the Pascagoula or Pearl), these clearly go against the water quality and quantity goals of the RESTORE Act. As much as possible, in your efforts and with your resources, please involve and inform local officials and decision-makers about the bad impacts of their projects.

Gail Singley Laird, public:

Everything I planned to talk about has been addressed and has been addressed in a positive way. The gentleman who just spoke brought up an issue I think is very important. We recently had an attempt to put an oyster project in Bay Saint Louis (I live in Pass Christian). And that project was denied. As we came out of that meeting, one of our city officials discussed pollution of the oyster reefs and how we need oyster gardens, which we do, just not in that situation. Well I pointed out that we have these huge culverts along the coast that are used to transfer stormwater runoff. He was very proud that they had put bigger culverts on the beaches in Pass Christian and along the coast. It is my understanding that the larger the culvert, the easier it is to transfer the stormwater runoff directly into the Gulf without any opportunity for dissipation. He was very uninformed, in my opinion. This comment made a few minutes ago underscores a wish that I would like you to consider—please take advantage of the opportunity to educate elected city officials about what's going on. If you'll recall after the oil spill, we had comments from our governor and lieutenant governor like 'the fish will swim away from it' or 'the odor that you smell from it burning is that is lawnmower exhaust', which is interesting because you could really smell it at night. I think education is important, especially for our city governments. It's a scary issue having these culverts; they've been there for as long as I can remember. I've been in environmental activism for over 40 years in Mississippi. I was appointed to a 7-year stand as a commissioner for DEQ. It's something that's always been there. These beach closings, we don't have as many oysters as we used to. I think it would help first and foremost to educate our city administrators.

Chris Lagarde, public:

We need oversight. There is a disconnect between the federal folks and local folks. What Gail said is perfectly true. Don't stop with the city officials, you've got county officials, state officials. Their idea of economic development is building—in Waveland, they built concrete ditches to drain stormwater, with FEMA money. We are using federal money to send water to the Gulf much more quickly. People forget that this money is actually federal money. If it was up to the states that collected the money that the federal agencies collect, we wouldn't have it. What happens is it gets to a local level and we have problems. In Mississippi, MDMR just bought a \$300,000 boat, because they don't believe the data on red snapper from the national fisheries is accurate, so they are going to collect their own data with a \$300,000 boat. That's foolish. We're talking of building an aquarium. That's not going to help the Gulf

rebuild. We're overfishing. We need wetlands, and we're supporting development that overruns "low-quality wetlands" and there's no such thing as low-quality wetlands, not if you live along the coast. We have lost all our institutional knowledge. There's no fisheries scientists that will stand up and say 'this is not the right thing'. It's all political. We're talking about hatcheries to raise oysters in Mississippi. Oysters are pretty easy. A hatchery's not necessarily a bad idea, but it's not going to be a panacea. We've had worse water quality issues this year than I can ever remember—red tides, low DO. Three weeks ago, I was walking a quarter-mile stretch of beach and I counted 120 dead Gulf toadfish (oyster fish). We don't know why. Thank you.

James Miller, public:

I'm tired of seeing fish dying all the time. I'm a bottom trawler and I'm sad that we're here today and this is terrible. I hope you all do something to restore oyster reef. Been fishing all my life. Since the oil spill, my industry and my business has suffered tremendously. If you think BP has paid me for my loss, they haven't. The oyster industry; I've been doing it for 25 years. I'm tired of Jamie Miller telling me about water quality. I'm watching fish die all around me. It's out there. I'm a bottom trawler and it's sad that we're here today and this is terrible. I hope you all do something with the money such as restore oyster reefs instead of letting them build buildings, baseball parks. My industry needs it. I've oystered 80 days in six years. I own a \$200,000 boat with \$25,000 a year for upkeep and you're about to drop me out of business with this BP oil spill. If you all think BP has taken care of us, you are wrong. My health issues; I'm tremendously sick. 108 days in the hospital and 52 visits to the emergency room with vomiting, with benzene, etc. in my blood system, kidneys and liver are swollen. They didn't care. They sprayed me with dispersants. All over me. With the red, white, blue planes. My industry is really suffering. I don't have 15 years for you to fix my problems, so I hope you all do it quickly. I'm tired of arguing with DMR, Jamie Miller, Richard Gollott, Phil Bryant. He says we're farmers of the sea, well he's a liar. I'm a farmer and they ain't done nothing for me. They want to put sewers in Jackson, MS with our RESTORE money. We need it out there, where it really needs to be. Not only my family, but the Vietnamese, the white, black people; we're all suffering. If you all do something, do something with those oysters because it's a terrible situation.

Thao Vu, Director of Mississippi Coalition for Vietnamese-American Fisher Folks & Families:

I want to reiterate several previous comments, particularly the last three comments. There are only several fishermen here and I applaud them for being here. Many fishermen are not here because they are out shrimping and cannot be here. I recently requested the comment period be extended two weeks. I cannot reiterate the importance of it. We need more fishermen to get this information to review the updated draft plan and to submit the comments in time. Particularly since the Council took the liberty to translate the fact sheets and the Updated Draft Plan. We would appreciate it from us. I want to comment on the

draft plan. We think three years is too long to wait for the next funded priorities list, particularly for the public engagement process. We think that two years is much more doable. I understand why you are proposing three years for interest to accrue but I think two years is much better. We also recommend an external independent panel of multidisciplinary scientists (natural, social scientists) and representative members of the public to review proposed projects. We think there should be greater transparency. To us, the best available science means that we have not only external and independent scientists but a holistic external process in place to assess pros and cons of projects. For example, the 1-page fact sheets recently given to us lacked sufficient information. We need uniform monitoring metrics, accessible data along with pros and cons.

Jill Mastrototaro, The National Wildlife Federation:

The National Wildlife Federation commends the Council and staff for a strong draft blueprint to guide the Council's next chapter. We're pleased with Council's focus on revising submission guidelines to provide clearer guidance to those crafting and reviewing proposals and how these proposals can link back to RESTORE Act priority criteria. The council has made great strides in public engagement to provide the public another opportunity to review these guidelines. We're pleased the Council has responded to many stakeholders from across the Gulf region in lifting up coordination of all phases across the restoration process (workshops and meetings and hope the Council will share tangible outcomes from those meetings). I would like to commend Alabama and Mississippi for their presence at several Draft Plan Update meetings (e.g., Mr. Burch and Mr. Wyatt). We think that's a great step forward in demonstrating the cooperative opportunities around these plans. We appreciate the Council's dedication to large-scale projects, as they're key to sustaining the long-term health and sustainability of the Gulf, including vital estuaries like the Mississippi Sound that span several states. As it references the Council's interest in exploring financial approaches for large-scale projects, we recommend consider coordinate timing future FPL opportunities with other funding streams, like NRDA and NFWF. And look to other outside funding sources, such as USDA's announcement last week for private Gulf Coast landowners. [Quotes draft plan update: "The task of restoring the Gulf environment is a multi-generational undertaking"]. As we recognize that we are in a marathon, not a sprint, this draft plan really allows the Council to look at long-term transformative restoration opportunities for multiple generations. The National Wildlife Federation looks forward to helping support the Council as it finalizes this plan and moves into implementation. Thank you.