Florida Gulf Coast Tributaries Hydrologic Restoration Program

RESTORE Council Proposal Document

General Information

Title:
Florida Gulf Coast Tributaries Hydrologic Restoration Program

Project Abstract:
The State of Florida, through the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), was awarded RESTORE Act Council-Selected Restoration Component funds to establish the Florida Gulf Coast Tributaries Hydrologic Restoration Program (Planning) in 2022.

The Florida Gulf Coast Tributaries Hydrologic Restoration Program (THRP) supports the primary RESTORE Comprehensive Plan goal to restore water quality and quantity throughout the Florida Gulf Coast by underwriting a comprehensive suite of linked, high-priority hydrologic improvement projects. Examples include canal plugging, restoring natural dimensions of tidal passes/inlets, restoring/reconnecting wetlands, installing erosion control or water control structures, etc. Planning and implementation projects proposed in Florida watersheds that drain to the Gulf of America will be considered under this program.

The THRP improves flow regime dynamics, nutrient cycling, salinity gradients, wildlife habitat and biodiversity, recreational experiences, and may help reduce algal blooms and fish kills. The THRP framework allows for administration of project funding that targets projects that provide cumulative benefits to the Gulf and link environmental benefits between selected projects and other restoration projects in a watershed or region. Combining or leveraging projects within a geographic area contributes to large-scale water resource improvements while maximizing each dollar. The program duration is 7 years.

FPL Category: Cat1: Planning/ Cat2: Implementation

Activity Type: Program

Program: Florida Gulf Coast Tributaries Hydrologic Restoration Program

Co-sponsoring Agency(ies): N/A

Is this a construction project?:
Yes

RESTORE Act Priority Criteria:
(II) 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.
(III) 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.

Priority Criteria Justification:
The Florida THRP addresses priority Criteria II large-scale projects and programs and Criteria III projects contained in RESTORE Council Comprehensive Plan (Council 2022). The THRP funds a suite of projects focused on restoration of hydrologic connectivity and natural salinity regimes in watersheds along Florida's Gulf Coast. The THRP improves estuarine and coastal waters within Florida at a large scale by restoring hydroperiods, salinity regimes, and freshwater flows. Projects selected for funding prioritize projects included in other state or federal restoration planning documents, such as Basin Management Action Plans (BMAPs), Minimum Flow Levels (MFLs) and their associated Recovery and Prevention Strategies, Surface Water Improvement Management (SWIM) plans, the State Expenditure Plan (SEP), and Florida Trustee Implementation Group (FL TIG) restoration plans, which identify both the need and benefits of such projects and which are based on strong science.

Deepwater Horizon (DWH) funds have been invested throughout Florida's Gulf Coast watersheds to improve water quality, hydrology, and habitats. DWH funds have leveraged State and local investments in BMAPs, SWIM Plans, and MFLs. The THRP significantly increases these investments. State environmental agencies, including FDEP, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), and the state's Water Management Districts (WMD) continue to collaborate with DWH funding partners to build on existing investments to enable Florida to fund projects that will make significant, measurable improvements to ecosystem resilience, sustainability, and natural defenses by re-establishing natural hydrology and connectivity between freshwater and marine habitats. While individual projects may be limited in scope, THRP's project selection ensures collective contribution to large-scale water quality, water quantity and habitat restoration in the Gulf Coast ecosystem.

Project Duration (in years): 7

Goals

Primary Comprehensive Plan Goal:
Restore Water Quality and Quantity

Primary Comprehensive Plan Objective:
Restore, Improve, and Protect Water Resources

Secondary Comprehensive Plan Objectives:
N/A

Secondary Comprehensive Plan Goals:
N/A

PF Restoration Technique(s):
Protect and conserve coastal, estuarine, and riparian habitats: Land acquisition
Restore hydrology and natural processes: Restore hydrologic connectivity
Restore hydrology and natural processes: Restore natural salinity regimes

Location

Location:
Florida watersheds that drain to the Gulf of America including Perdido, Pensacola, Choctawhatchee – St. Andrew, Apalachicola – Chipola, Ochlocknee – St. Marks, Suwannee, Springs Coast, Withlacoochee, Tampa Bay, Tampa Bay Tributaries, Sarasota-Peace-Myakka, Charlotte Harbor, Caloosahatchee, Everglades West Coast, Everglades, and Florida Keys

HUC8 Watershed(s):
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Choctawhatchee-Escambia) - Florida Panhandle Coastal(Perdido Bay)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Choctawhatchee-Escambia) - Escambia(Lower Conecuh)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Choctawhatchee-Escambia) - Florida Panhandle Coastal(Perdido)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(St. Johns) - St. Johns(Oklawaha)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Southern Florida) - Southern Florida(Everglades)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Southern Florida) - Southern Florida(Florida Bay-Florida Keys)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Southern Florida) - Southern Florida(Big Cypress Swamp)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Southern Florida) - Southern Florida(Caloosahatchee)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Peace-Tampa Bay) - Peace(Peace)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Peace-Tampa Bay) - Peace(Myakka)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Peace-Tampa Bay) - Peace(Charlotte Harbor)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Peace-Tampa Bay) - Tampa Bay(Sarasota Bay)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Peace-Tampa Bay) - Tampa Bay(Manatee)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Peace-Tampa Bay) - Tampa Bay(Little Manatee)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Peace-Tampa Bay) - Tampa Bay(Alafia)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Peace-Tampa Bay) - Tampa Bay(Hillsborough)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Peace-Tampa Bay) - Tampa Bay(Tampa Bay)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Peace-Tampa Bay) - Tampa Bay(Crystal-Pithlachascotee)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Peace-Tampa Bay) - Tampa Bay(Withlacoochee)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Suwannee) - Aucilla-Waccasassa(Waccasassa)

South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Suwannee) - Aucilla-Waccasassa(Econfina-Steinhatchee)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Suwannee) - Suwannee(Lower Suwannee)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Suwannee) - Suwannee(Santa Fe)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Ochlockonee) - Ochlockonee(Lower Ochlockonee)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Apalachicola) - Apalachicola(Apalachicola)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Apalachicola) - Apalachicola(New)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Apalachicola) - Apalachicola(Apalachicola Bay)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Choctawhatchee-Escambia) - Florida Panhandle Coastal(St. Andrew-St. Joseph Bays)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Choctawhatchee-Escambia) - Florida Panhandle Coastal(Choctawhatchee Bay)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Choctawhatchee-Escambia) - Florida Panhandle Coastal(Pensacola Bay)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Apalachicola) - Apalachicola(Chipola)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Choctawhatchee-Escambia) - Florida Panhandle Coastal(Yellow)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Choctawhatchee-Escambia) - Florida Panhandle Coastal(Blackwater)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Choctawhatchee-Escambia) - Choctawhatchee(Pea)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Choctawhatchee-Escambia) - Choctawhatchee(Lower Choctawhatchee)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Choctawhatchee-Escambia) - Escambia(Escambia)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Suwannee) - Aucilla-Waccasassa(Aucilla)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Ochlockonee) - Ochlockonee(Apalachee Bay-St. Marks)

State(s):
Florida

County/Parish(es):
FL - Broward
FL - Escambia
FL - Pasco
FL - Calhoun
FL - Pinellas
FL - Charlotte
FL - Citrus
FL - Collier
FL - Columbia
FL - Dixie
FL - Franklin
FL - Gadsden
FL - Gilchrist
FL - Polk
FL - Sarasota
FL - Sumter
FL - Suwannee

FL - Taylor
FL - Union
FL - Wakulla
FL - Alachua
FL - Bay
FL - Bradford
FL - Glades
FL - Gulf
FL - Hamilton
FL - Santa Rosa
FL - Walton
FL - Washington
FL - DeSoto
FL - Hardee
FL - Hernando
FL - Hillsborough
FL - Holmes
FL - Jackson
FL - Jefferson
FL - Lafayette
FL - Lake
FL - Lee
FL - Leon
FL - Levy
FL - Liberty
FL - Madison
FL - Manatee
FL - Marion
FL - Miami-Dade
FL - Monroe
FL - Okaloosa
FL - Palm Beach
FL - Hendry

Congressional District(s):
FL - 3
FL - 14
FL - 15
FL - 26
FL - 11
FL - 13
FL - 20
FL - 16
FL - 5

FL - 12
FL - 1
FL - 19
FL - 25
FL - 2
FL - 17
FL - 28

Narratives

Introduction and Overview:

The Florida Gulf Coast Tributaries Hydrologic Restoration Program (THRP) restores the hydrologic and salinity conditions along the Gulf Coast wetlands and estuaries by reconnecting natural drainage pathways and re-establishing historic sheet flows. Alteration in quantities and timing of freshwater flows has damaged estuaries and coastal habitats, harming water quality, benthic communities, oysters, seagrass, and juvenile fish, and encouraging the proliferation of invasive species, which decreases habitat, biodiversity and productivity. Alterations in hydrology can also affect the formation, magnitude, and persistence of blue-green algae blooms in Florida waters. See Figure 1 for map of Florida watersheds that flow to the Gulf of America.

Managing freshwater flows of both surface waters and groundwater is a priority in Florida to achieve MFLs for water resources (Figure 2), Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs), and Numeric Nutrient Criteria (NNC) (FDEP 2019). Modified water deliveries and reconnecting flow paths and drainage networks are best practices for restoring the timing, frequency, and magnitude of freshwater to coastal ecosystems, thereby supporting the dynamic flow regimes important for fluvial geomorphology and subsurface groundwater exchanges that promote good water quality and ecological health (Forbes 2012). In addition, restoration of natural groundwater flow regimes and its interactions with surface water in hydrologic restoration are critical to achieving sustainable watershed/estuary hydrology in coastal areas (AGWT 2003, Sophocleous 2002, Woessner 2000 and Winter 1995). Multiple flow regimes are needed to maintain biotic and abiotic resources within river ecosystems. It is believed by water managers that maintenance of stream ecosystems rests on streamflow management practices that protect physical processes. Processes that mimic the natural hydrograph, to the extent feasible, will influence biological systems and achieve the ecological stability of the communities and species in the waterway/watershed (Hill et al. 1991, as cited in SWFWMD 2010).

Florida will underwrite intrinsically linked, high-priority projects using a watershed/estuary-based approach to provide regional benefits and guide the selection of projects best suited to address the hydrologic and salinity regime stressors within a watershed. THRP project selection prioritizes projects that have been identified in other state or federal restoration planning documents, such as MFLs, BMAPs, SWIM plans, the SEP, and FL TIG restoration plans, which identify both the need and benefits of such projects. Initial project planning and design, technical review, stakeholder engagement, and identification of risks are typically part of the development of these restoration plans, therefore use of this approach to identify and prioritize projects for funding under the THRP promotes the use of Best Available Science (BAS) and improves the likelihood of project success. This helps to ensure that this program can be successfully

implemented and will achieve synergies to effect large-scale ecosystem restoration. Collaboration with Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA), National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), or other state and federal funding programs will allow the THRP to fund more or larger scale projects and maximize funds to achieve large-scale restoration.

Florida plans to apply Best Available Science (BAS) reviews of THRP that were completed upon original application of the program in Funded Priorities List 3b. This is justified due to the methods remaining largely the same and the scientific integrity of the program potentially increasing. For example, the Pugh Gulley Restoration Project in Santa Rosa County, funded through FPL3b, will apply the background science (e.g., baseline soil loss calculation, Natural Resource Conservation Service techniques, etc.) and activities related to feasibility (property owner outreach, planning, engineering, design, and permitting) to accomplish project goals. The next iteration of funding could be used to complete implementation (construction) of the project. The baseline soil loss estimates could be compared to post-construction conditions and confirm the estimated amount of sediment prevented from entering and being transported downstream. Likewise, more work has been done to site, design and construct tributary hydrologic restoration projects in Florida, only lending more credibility and experience to the practice of reconnecting streams with their floodplains. Finally, land acquisitions will continue to be accomplished in service of planning and completing THRP activities and projects, as described in the original program application.

Florida collaborated with the public and local entities to develop the original proposal for this program through numerous meetings with local governments, WMDs, National Estuary Programs (NEP), non-governmental organizations (NGO), and Florida's RESTORE Act Centers of Excellence (COE). FDEP will continue to collaborate with local entities and the public for their assistance in identifying potential program projects and activities. The public and stakeholders will be able to submit proposals for funding projects or activities under THRP. FDEP will hold a webinar to present project selection criteria and will make draft project lists available for public review and comment. The final projects list(s) and workplans will be submitted to Council staff for BAS external review and approval.

Partners: Through the Commitment and Planning Support award, Florida collaborated to develop the original proposal for this program. Florida held meetings with local governments, Water Management Districts, NEPs, NGOs, Florida’s COE, the Gulf Consortium, and other Council members. The THRP will rely on the relationships and partners already in place as part of the MFL identification process and SWIM and SEP plans, which relied on extensive stakeholder outreach and participation throughout their development and implementation.

Goals/Objectives: As upland, estuarine, and marine habitats are intrinsically connected, a program that reconnects natural drainage pathways to restore hydrologic and salinity regimes on Florida’s Gulf Coast, emphasizing projects with linked benefits in a watershed or region, will maximize restoration to achieve cumulative benefits. In the Comprehensive Plan Update (Council 2022), 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.” The THRP focuses on addressing the stressors described and identified in MFLs, TMDLs/BMAPs, SWIM, and Florida SEP as well as any other approved restoration plans to

achieve the Council's goal of restoring water quality and quantity and Florida's desired outcome of restoring hydrologic and salinity conditions of Gulf Coast wetlands and estuaries.

Commitments: FDEP's overall mission is to protect, conserve and manage the state's natural resources and enforce its environmental laws. (FDEP 2023). This makes FDEP well suited to manage the THRP and select projects that result in restoration of hydrologic and salinity regimes.

The Florida Legislature determined that the adoption of MFLs (along with recovery and prevention strategies where needed) required immediate action and directs FDEP and WMDs to adopt minimum flows and minimum water levels for waterbodies pursuant to Section 373.042, Florida Statues (F.S.). Comprehensive hydrologic restoration projects have been identified in adopted MFL recovery or prevention strategies, TMDLs/BMAPs, SWIM plans, and the Florida SEP (e.g., Lee County's North East Caloosahatchee Tributaries Restoration Project). By leveraging priority projects developed through science-based planning processes and public engagement, the projects funded by this program will significantly benefit Florida's Gulf Coast and leverage state investments (such as the state's Alternative Water Supply grant funding).

Environmental Stressors:Streambank and shoreline erosion, channel migration, and alterations to hydrologic flow paths due to natural and anthropogenic sources are considered some of the stressors resulting in tributary and hydrologic stressors in coastal watersheds. These stressors can cause alterations in the natural connectivity of a wetland, estuary, or stream system and result in the loss of habitat biodiversity and ecosystem function. Alterations to natural water features can impact both freshwater flows and salinity regimes throughout Florida's coastal streams and estuaries. Florida law requires state WMDs to set MFLs for priority water bodies and assess and document current conditions for significant harm associated with water withdrawals and certain alterations.

Environmental Benefits: Coastal habitats will benefit from THRP projects due to the restoration of natural hydrologic and salinity regimes that will result in healthier stream systems, wetlands and marshes (Leibowitz et al. 2023). The THRP is also expected to improve water quality; increase benthic communities, oysters, seagrass, and fish populations; and reduce populations of invasive species. THRP funding is affirmatively directed toward projects that provide cumulative benefits to the Florida Gulf Coast and link environmental benefits between selected and other restoration projects in a watershed or region. Linking restoration projects will contribute to large-scale hydrologic improvements. A successful program will restore and enhance ecosystem resilience, sustainability, and natural defenses by re-establishing natural hydrology and connectivity between freshwater and marine habitats.

FPL Planning Framework: The THRP emphasizes the use of priority techniques to re-establish flows through hydrologic impediments and focus on allowing natural sheet flows across wetland areas (NRCS 2008, as cited in Council 2019). Efforts to restore natural salinity regimes may include plugging canals; restoring the natural dimensions of tidal passes and inlets; installing or enlarging culverts, gates, low water crossings and other structures to re-establish natural flows; strategic use of natural storage features or impoundments to capture and store flood waters for drier conditions, etc. These efforts will support the overarching THRP goals of restoring

hydrology and salinity regimes. Selection criteria that support these overarching goals on a large scale is imperative to program success. Selection criteria described below in the Methods section are intended to select high-quality projects that maximize the extent and success of restoration under the THRP.

Costs: $12,605,000. Projects that leverage other funding sources will be prioritized under THRP selection criteria to maximize cost-benefit ratios and support large-scale restoration on Florida's Gulf Coast.

Timeline: The duration of program planning and implementation is expected to be 7 years.

Proposed Methods :

Florida will continue screen projects proposed for funding under the THRP based on selection criteria that have been presented to the public for review and comment. The THRP prioritizes large-scale hydrologic restoration projects that have been previously identified in adopted MFL recovery or prevention strategies, TMDL/BMAPs, SWIM plans, and the Florida SEP (e.g., Lee County's North East Caloosahatchee Tributaries Restoration Project). Selected projects will implement restoration techniques that restore hydrologic connectivity or restore natural salinity regimes. Restoring physical and chemical processes is key to successfully achieve desired restoration outcomes. Re-establishing normative rates and magnitudes of physical, chemical, and biological processes have been found to be more sustainable solutions for restoring healthy stream and estuary ecosystems (Beechie et al. 2010). Successful hydrologic restoration should be guided by sustainable actions: 1) address the root causes of degradation, 2) consider physical and biological potential of the site, 3) scale actions commensurate to problem(s), and 4) articulate expected outcomes for ecosystem dynamics.

Projects funded under the THRP are developed using BAS such as the water quality/quantity assessment currently used in TMDL development and Waters Not Attaining Standards, which helps identify water bodies with hydrologic or nutrient loading significance (FDEP 2024), MFLs, and water level monitoring data collected by each WMD, etc. Improved hydrologic connectivity, salinity, groundwater and surface water exchanges and water quality at these locations will positively influence the overall system. Estimated improvements for THRP restoration techniques (e.g., canal filling or wetland restoration) are derived from site-specific information and peer-reviewed sources. By establishing estimates of water quantity and quality improvements through quantitative means (e.g., changes freshwater low levels, restores natural salinities, etc.), individual projects can be evaluated together for cumulative benefits.

THRP selection criteria focuses on restoring the critical drivers and functions of the hydrologic regime. This approach promotes recovery of healthy ecosystems through flow regime dynamics, balancing sediment and organic matter inputs, nutrient cycling, hyporheic exchanges, promoting Low Impact Development (LID) practices, conservation, and public-private partnerships that combine habitat creation and removal of human constraints to achieve ecological aims (Beechie et al. 2010). Effective selection criteria will lead to high-quality projects, enabling the THRP to significantly improve hydrologic connectivity of Gulf Coast watersheds and restore natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife (essential) habitats, and coastal wetlands. THRP success will translate into restored and enhanced ecosystems through the

re-establishment of natural hydrology and restored connectivity between freshwater and marine habitats.

Florida selects projects based on frameworks used in other Florida financial assistance programs and state planning documents (e.g., NFWF's Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund Restoration Strategy, the State Expenditure Plan, etc.), and for funds distributed under other DWH restoration programs since 2013 (GEBF and NRDA) (FWC and FDEP 2018). Florida established various financial assistance programs and funding collaborations targeted at improving water quality and quantity, such as Nonpoint Source (NPS) (Section 319 and Water Quality Grants), State Revolving Fund, Water Quality Improvement Grant Program (formerly Wastewater Grant Program), Alternative Water Supply Grant Program , Springs Restoration Grant Program and WMD cooperative funding agreements, all of which utilize BAS selection criteria.

Florida will hold a webinar to present project selection criteria to the public. The selection criteria used for Funded Priorities List 3b (FPL3b) and summarized below will be made available for public review and comment. Similar to FPL 3b, FDEP will initiate a call for projects with the final project selection criteria. Project proponents may submit a proposal for consideration using a publicly noticed project portal. A technical review panel of agency experts will assess project proposals using the reviewed and finalized project selection criteria and develop a draft list of proposed projects for funding. The draft project list will be published on the Florida DWH website for public review and comment. Florida will finalize the list after review of the public comments and submit the final project list(s) and workplans to Council staff for BAS external review and Council staff approval.

Selection criteria will ensure that selected projects collectively contribute to large-scale hydrologic and salinity improvements. The extent to which a proposed project meets individual selection criteria and overall program goals and objectives and contributes to large-scale restoration efforts across the Gulf Coast region will dictate how projects are prioritized for selection.

Selection Criteria 1: Eligibility Screening
Geographic Relevance: Projects must be geographically located within the 8-digit HUCs identified in this activity description.
Relevant Goals and Objectives: Projects, at a minimum, must address the primary Comprehensive Plan goal of restoring water quality and quantity and the primary objective of restoring, improving, and protecting water resources.
Management Capabilities: Project sponsors requesting funding will need to demonstrate strong operation and management capabilities, as well as financial resources, to assure the long-term success of the project. This screening criteria is not intended to prevent small or disadvantaged communities from participating in the program.

Selection Criteria 2: Technical Basis and Justification
Alignment with Planning Framework: Project proposals should demonstrate how the project aligns with restoration priorities, approaches, and techniques as listed in the Council's Planning

Framework.

Proposed in Existing Plans: Projects already proposed in existing plans (e.g., BMAPs, MFLs, SWIM plans, GEBF Restoration Strategy, SEP, etc.) will be given greater consideration as these projects have typically been previously vetted for BAS, feasibility, cost effectiveness, multiple benefits, etc.

Benefits: Projects should have clear benefits to impaired or other priority water bodies, including those already identified in MFLs or SWIM plans to maximize benefits within a watershed. Priority will be given to projects that link environmental benefits between selected THRP projects and other restoration projects in a watershed or region. In addition, projects should clearly outline how their implementation will result in the environmental benefits outlined in the proposal (e.g., improved flow regime dynamics, nutrient cycling, salinity gradients, wildlife habitat and biodiversity, etc.).

Best Available Science: Project proposals should clearly explain how they address BAS and cite scientific literature.

Selection Criteria 3: Feasibility

Technical Efficacy and Constructability: Project proposals should demonstrate feasibility. Such demonstration can be achieved through modeling, completion of feasibility studies, examples of successful analogous projects, etc.

Resilience: Projects should be designed to be resilient, taking into account sea level rise, hurricanes, other major storm events, etc., where possible. Projects with resilience considerations built into the designs/plans will be given greater consideration.

Cost-Effectiveness: Project proposals should outline their proposed funding needs and justification for cost effectiveness. Projects that show cost savings (or that have significant benefit-to-cost ratios) will be prioritized.

Schedule: Projects must demonstrate project readiness and indicate their proposed schedule through completion, with significant or critical project milestones clearly identified.

Risk: Project proposals must clearly identify any potential risk to project success and should discuss strategies to mitigate the identified risks.

Selection Criteria 4: Project Status and Leveragability

Project Status: Project proposals will indicate the state of readiness to proceed. Projects that have achieved higher levels of readiness will be given greater consideration.

Matching or Leveraged Funds: Project proposals will include a discussion on matching or leveraged funds (including in-kind contributions). Projects that include matching or leveraged funds from other sources will be given greater consideration.

Environmental Compliance: Project proposals should identify all required environmental compliance approvals or associated permits needed for the project. Projects that have achieved higher levels of environmental compliance will be given greater consideration.

Environmental Benefits:

Healthy, functioning waterbodies along Florida's Gulf Coast provide a gradient of saltwater, estuarine, and freshwater environments critical to a variety of species and natural habitats. Linear infrastructure such as roads and levees traversing wetlands, floodplains, and other aquatic areas can block or impede surface flows essential to healthy ecosystem function (Sklar and Browder 1998 as cited in Council 2019). Projects funded under THRP address hydrologic

impediments and contribute to restoring the multiple flow regimes on waterways flowing into Florida's Gulf Coast. Thus, projects funded under THRP provide benefits to biotic and abiotic resources within river/estuarine ecosystems. Federal and Florida laws recognize the need to regulate the influence of human activities affecting water quality and water quantity and ecosystem health. Artificial hydrologic modifications (levees, dams, and dikes) change the source, quality, or quantity of water and sediment that is available to coastal ecosystems. The THRP will focus on addressing these anthropogenic modifications and develop plans to restore saltwater gradients and hydrologic connectivity, which increase the health of the environments where unique organisms can survive and prosper. Coastal wetland loss is contributing to the vulnerability of coastal populations and wetlands conservation and restoration is often advocated as a means of reducing the impacts of coastal storms (Boutwell and Westra 2016). THRP restores and protects coastal wetlands which increases resilience in coastal areas. The THRP prioritizes the funding of hydrologic restoration projects identified in MFL recovery strategies. These projects help restore and protect the physical processes that influence biological systems and mimic the natural hydrograph (to the extent feasible). Mimicking the natural hydrograph leads to ecological stability of the communities and species in the waterway/watershed (Stalnaker (1990) and Hill et al. 1991 as cited in SWFWMD 2010). THRP-funded projects that implement streamflow management will result in reconnecting and/or restoring hydrologic connectivity and salinity gradients in thousands of acres of habitats along Florida's Gulf Coast. This strategy proved effective when used in a National Oceanic and Atmospheric (NOAA) Sea Grant-funded project in the Upper Apalachicola Bay. The project reconnected severed drainage pathways by implementing 16 low-water crossings, 37 ditch blocks and 19 culvert modifications (NWFWMD n.d.a). Freshwater flows in the project subbasins rehydrated wetlands draining to East Bay and improved estuarine habitat conditions. A total of 2,374 acres was restored for $324,306. Projects selected for the THRP will quantify environmental benefits identified in BMAPs/TMDLs, MFL recovery strategies, and SWIM plans to ensure that desired ecological quality is addressed with options to achieve overall water quality, health, and resilience of the larger ecosystem. Successful implementation of the THRP will result in improved flow regime dynamics, nutrient cycling, salinity gradients, SAV and wildlife habitat, biodiversity, with the potential for reduced algal blooms and fish kills. Tying together projects with existing plans (e.g., the MFLs, RESTORE SEP, SWIM, GEBF) ensures sound planning for successful restoration as projects continually build upon and contribute to one another during the restoration strategy development process (FWC and FDEP, 2018).

Metrics:

Metric Title: HR009 : Restoring hydrology - Acres with restored hydrology

Target: 0.99

Narrative: Florida will use this as a program-wide metric to evaluate the success of the program. Target values or ranges of values will be provided as project activities are identified. Program success will be determined as the number of acres of coastal streams, estuaries, wetlands, and associated upland habitats with restored hydrology or salinity regimes. However, each project or activity funded under this program may not be captured by this metric. Additional metrics will be determined to capture the benefits of

each technique utilized under this program; specifically, each project or activity selected under the THRP will have specific metrics aimed at evaluating the success of the individual activity.

Metric Title: HC003 : Land acquisition - Acres acquired in fee

Target: 0.99

Narrative: Florida will use this as a project or activity metric. The project or activity metrics may be adjusted as needed once projects or activities are funded. Metrics may be added, removed, or replaced as appropriate at the project work plan application stage. Once a project or activity is selected a target value will be established. Project or activity success will be determined as the total number of acres acquired in fee. The purpose of this metric will be to verify that acquisition has been completed, and the performance measure will be an executed and recorded deed. Upon transfer of the parcel to public ownership, this metric will be complete. The outcome will be an increase in protected acres.

Risk and Uncertainties:

Projects potential risks and uncertainties include cost overruns and public opposition. Risks will be minimized through public engagement and ongoing transparency, careful cost estimates and reasonable contingencies, effective planning and design, third-party construction oversight, and nimble adaptive management. Bad weather can also delay project completion, but adequate planning and construction management will minimize the impact. Operating entities that receive THRP funding need to provide documentation of strong operation and management capabilities and financial resources to assure long-term project success.

The Council has expressed its commitment to using BAS to consider relative sea level rise, increasing threats to water quality and water quantity and other risks as it makes coastal restoration funding decisions. Reconnecting natural drainage pathways and restoring natural sheet flows will improve coastal estuarine habitats that in turn provide added shoreline protection from hurricanes and flooding. Reconnecting natural drainage pathways and restoring salinity regimes are critical processes that allow the system to respond to future perturbations through natural physical and biological adjustments, enabling riverine ecosystems to evolve and continue to function over variable climate conditions (Beechie et al. 2010).

As part of project selection and throughout the 7-year lifespan of the program, the THRP will encourage resilience and adaptation planning in the engineering and design (E&D), and implementation, for selected projects.

Monitoring and Adaptive Management:

Monitoring will be conducted on two levels: programmatic and project specific. Programmatic monitoring will focus on the programmatic metrics specified. At the project level, monitoring will be targeted toward the project metrics listed for each project and will be specific to resource

outcomes. Project-specific monitoring will validate restoration techniques and best management practices used and will inform lessons learned applicable to future projects. Combined programmatic and project-level monitoring will be conducted to understand, document, and analyze how well projects perform compared to the expected outcomes and to provide lessons learned to help guide future project selection and adapt the THRP to ensure its goals and objectives are achieved. Monitoring at the project level will be guided by the project (e.g., acres with restored hydrology, acres with reduced impacts, acres acquired in fee, etc.). Hydrologic restoration can be monitored using a variety of techniques such as water level recorders, flow monitoring gauges, as-built drawing with surveys elevations, etc., depending on specific project objectives and site characteristics. Under the THRP, projects will be required to submit a monitoring and adaptive management plan. These plans should be based on existing, peer-reviewed guidance documents, such as the NRDA MAM Manual and Council Observational Data Plan Guidance (Council 2021; DWH NRDA Trustees 2017). The monitoring protocols outlined in these plans will apply to long- and short-term outcomes. Potential examples of these outcomes include:

Long-term outcomes:
Evaluation of long-term water quality and salinity trends. This requires multiple years of data collection following specific project implementation, including an evaluation of historical and baseline data for affected areas, as available.
Evaluation of long-term trends affecting key habitats and communities, including seagrass, tidal marshes, and shellfish.
Monitoring and evaluation of site stability and resilience. Coastal restoration sites will be monitored to evaluate effects of public use, seasonal conditions, erosion or accretion, and major storm events, as applicable.

Short-term outcomes:
Acres or miles restored. These metrics can be based on models or construction as-built surveys.

Data Management:
Florida will provide a central location to access data and other information related to the projects funded under the THRP and make it available to the Council, regional partners, stakeholders, and any person or entity upon request. FDEP will submit an Observational Data Plan and Data Management Plan for the THRP as required by the Council.

FDEP will ensure that data is collected pursuant to approved Quality Assurance (QA) plans. Water quality grab sampling data collected, analyzed, and reported will comply with Chapter 62-160, Florida Administrative Code (F.A.C.) and will be documented using standardized project-specific datasheets, as appropriate. Handwritten hardcopy data will be scanned to PDF files and transcribed into a standard digital format. QA plans will specify minimum field and laboratory quality assurance, methodology, reporting, auditing, and data usability requirements. Grab sampling data will be input into WIN, the Watershed Information Network (https://floridadep.gov/dear/watershed-services-program/content/winstoret). WIN provides a platform for data providers to submit their data and perform data quality checking interactively prior to allowing the data to be migrated into the published WIN environment. WIN is used to

store and manage data and to report data to interested users and the EPA). Data can be accessed through a web-based search program at http://prodenv.dep.state.fl.us/DearWin/public/welcomeGeneralPublic?calledBy=GENERALPUBLIC. Any applicable continuous monitoring data will also follow DEP protocols for calibration and installation.

Collaboration:

During initial development of the THRP under FPL 3b, Florida collaborated with numerous State, regional, and local entities and stakeholders to develop and refine this program. FDEP held with local governments, WMDs, NEPs, NGOs, Florida's RESTORE Act COE, the Gulf Consortium, and other Council members. Additionally, SWIM plans and MFLs have extensive stakeholder outreach components during plan development and throughout implementation, including numerous public meetings and public education materials. THRP's project selection will consider each project's ability to leverage other funds to expand the impact of awards. Collaboration could include interactions with programs or projects funded with other DWH funds or other federal, state, or local government matching funds, including: Florida's State Revolving Fund loans and grants, annual springs funding, TMDL project funding, NPS grants, Florida legislature-directed project funding, WMD cooperative funding, the Gulf Consortium SEP, the Gulf Coast Counties' Multi Year Implementation Plans, Florida Gulf Coast NEPs' Comprehensive Conservation Management Plans (CCMP), estuary programs in the Panhandle future CCMPs, and potentially those projects and programs identified in the Governor's Executive Orders.

Public Engagement, Outreach, and Education:

Under Florida's SWIM and MFL programs, public engagement and education activities are routinely conducted as part of plan development, identification of watershed stressors and healthy flow requirements in water bodies, and potential solutions. These efforts have focused on restoration activities that address many of the stressors targeted by the THRP, allowing it to build on relationships forged with the public resulting from previous engagement and education efforts. MFL establishment requires data collection and technical analysis before draft MFLs are issued. Outreach materials are provided and public participation occurs during the draft MFL process, peer review, and rule adoption for a given waterway (Section 373.042 and .0421, F.S.).

Existing programs such as SWIM and MFLs have built a strong foundation for public engagement and education and will lead to encouragement for continued participation within the THRP and ensure that the value of selected projects reaches a large audience. Furthermore, the involvement of communities in SWIM and MFL programs increases the likelihood of meaningful public engagement and comments during the development of THRP project selection.

Additionally, FDEP has conducted public outreach as part of DWH NRDA restoration efforts since 2012, with over 80 projects in Florida to date. This includes FL TIG Restoration Plans 1 and 3, which directed NRDA funds to water quality, nutrient reduction, and recreational enhancements (FL TIG 2019, FL TIG 2024). NRDA's rigorous public engagement process provides stakeholders and other interested parties opportunities to submit project ideas via a Florida-maintained web portal, comment on projects at the draft Restoration Plan stage, and

comment on proposed projects. Florida also embarked on a large public outreach campaign as part of its GEBF Gulf Restoration Strategy development (FWC and FDEP 2018). The THRP will utilize the existing successful DWH public engagement structure without expending a great deal of the THRP administrative budget on these efforts.

Leveraging:

Funds: $11,250.00

Type: Leveraging

Status: Received

Source Type: Other

Description: The THRP leveraged some funds within the CPS federal award to develop the project selection criteria for multiple FPL 3b programs and present draft selection criteria in a public webinar. It is anticipated that the selection criteria and process will be adapted to future FPL programs. CPS funds are utilized for an array of activities that support planning and collaboration efforts to prepare grant applications prior to implementing specific projects through federal awards. The selection criteria put greater emphasis on projects that leverage other funding sources. Therefore, it is expected that individual projects will also leverage other federal funds and state funds. See Methods section for a description of selection criteria.

Funds: $7,000,000.00

Type: Leveraging

Status: Received

Source Type: Other

Description: THRP may leverage funds at the project level from other state and federal financial assistance programs and funding collaborations targeted at addressing similar issues such as legislative water projects. The amount received reflects statewide hydrologic restoration projects funded through FDEP over the last 3 years, FYs 22, 23, and 24.

Environmental Compliance:

Healthy, functioning waterbodies along Florida's Gulf Coast provide a gradient of saltwater, estuarine, and freshwater environments critical to a variety of species and natural habitats. Linear infrastructure such as roads and levees traversing wetlands, floodplains, and other aquatic areas can block or impede surface flows essential to healthy ecosystem function (Sklar and Browder 1998 as cited in Council 2019). Projects funded under THRP address hydrologic impediments and contribute to restoring the multiple flow regimes on waterways flowing into Florida's Gulf Coast. Thus, projects funded under THRP provide benefits to biotic and abiotic

resources within river/estuarine ecosystems. Federal and Florida laws recognize the need to regulate the influence of human activities affecting water quality and water quantity and ecosystem health. Artificial hydrologic modifications (levees, dams, and dikes) change the source, quality, or quantity of water and sediment that is available to coastal ecosystems. The THRP will focus on addressing these anthropogenic modifications and develop plans to restore saltwater gradients and hydrologic connectivity which increase the health of the environments where unique organisms can survive and prosper. Coastal wetland loss is contributing to the vulnerability of coastal populations and wetlands conservation and restoration is often advocated as a means of reducing the impacts of coastal storms (Boutwell and Westra 2016). THRP restores and protects coastal wetlands which increases resilience in coastal areas. The THRP prioritizes the funding of hydrologic restoration projects identified in MFL recovery strategies. These projects help restore and protect the physical processes that influence biological systems and mimic the natural hydrograph (to the extent feasible). Mimicking the natural hydrograph leads to ecological stability of the communities and species in the waterway/watershed (Stalnaker (1990) and Hill et al. 1991 as cited in SWFWMD 2010). THRP-funded projects that implement streamflow management will result in reconnecting and/or restoring hydrologic connectivity and salinity gradients in thousands of acres of habitats along Florida's Gulf Coast. This strategy proved effective when used in a National Oceanic and Atmospheric (NOAA) Sea Grant-funded project in the Upper Apalachicola Bay. The project reconnected severed drainage pathways by implementing 16 low-water crossings, 37 ditch blocks and 19 culvert modifications (NWFWMD n.d.a). Freshwater flows in the project subbasins rehydrated wetlands draining to East Bay and improved estuarine habitat conditions. A total of 2,374 acres was restored for $324,306. Projects selected for the THRP will quantify environmental benefits identified in MFL recovery strategies and SWIM plans to ensure that desired ecological quality is addressed with options to achieve overall water quality, health, and resilience of the larger ecosystem. Successful implementation of the THRP will result in improved flow regime dynamics, nutrient cycling, salinity gradients, SAV and wildlife habitat, biodiversity, with the potential to reduce algal blooms and fish kills. Tying together projects with existing plans (e.g., the MFLs, RESTORE SEP, SWIM, GEBF) ensures sound planning for successful restoration as projects continually build upon and contribute to one another during the restoration strategy development process (FWC and FDEP, 2018).

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Budget

Project Budget Narrative:
The budget for THRP is $12,605,000, of which the majority (approximately 90%) will be used for planning or implementation of projects or activities aimed at improving hydrology in coastal watersheds of the Gulf Coast. The total amount of funding requested for Category 1 is $5,042,000. Category 1 funds will be used for State of Florida program administration and project or activity specific planning, engineering, design and permitting. Program-level monitoring and adaptive management activities, and data management activities will also be funded with Category 1. Florida is requesting $7,563,000 in Category 2 funds to implement projects or activities such as construction of culverts, low water crossings, storage or recharge features, or land acquisition, and will include project- or activity- specific monitoring and adaptive management activities, and data management activities. More detailed budgets will be developed at the project or activity level when projects or activities are selected for funding under THRP, including appropriate contingencies for relevant projects. The percentages listed below apply to the entire $12,605,000 budget.

Total FPL Project/Program Budget Request:
$ 12,605,000.00

Estimated Percent Monitoring and Adaptive Management: 5 %

Estimated Percent Planning: 15 %

Estimated Percent Implementation: 80 %

Estimated Percent Project Management: N/A

Estimated Percent Data Management: N/A

Estimated Percent Contingency: 0 %

Is the Project Scalable?:
Yes

If yes, provide a short description regarding scalability.:
Yes, the program could be scaled to allow for more or less activities over a longer or shorter

duration of time. Scaling down the program would reduce the number of miles or acres of tributaries and habitats restored.

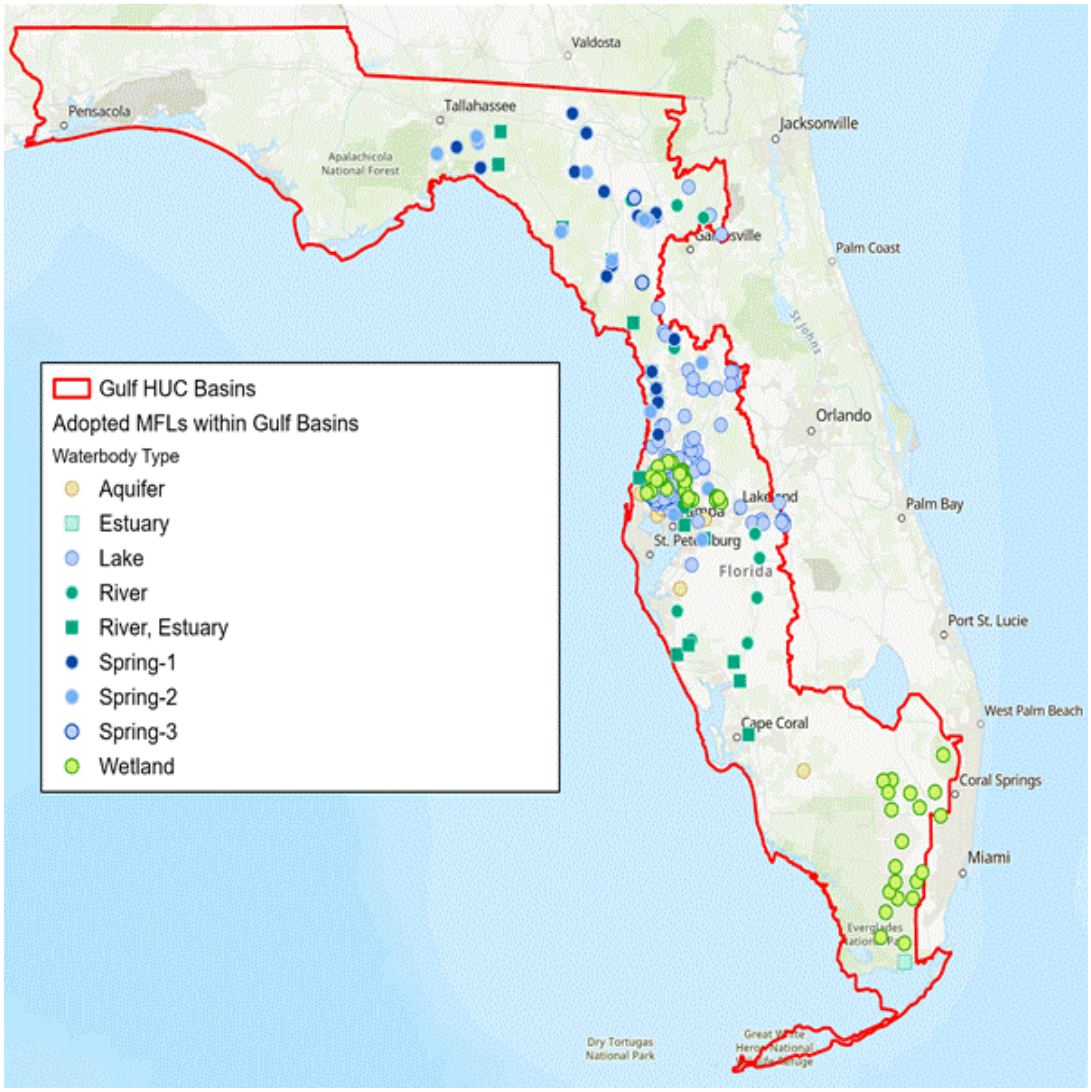
Environmental

Environmental Requirement	Has the Requirement Been Addressed?	Compliance Notes (e.g.,title and date of document, permit number, weblink etc.)
National Environmental Policy Act	N/A	Note not provided.
Endangered Species Act	N/A	Note not provided.
National Historic Preservation Act	N/A	Note not provided.
Magnuson-Stevens Act	N/A	Note not provided.
Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act	N/A	Note not provided.
Coastal Zone Management Act	N/A	Note not provided.
Coastal Barrier Resources Act	N/A	Note not provided.
Farmland Protection Policy Act	N/A	Note not provided.
Clean Water Act (Section 404)	N/A	Note not provided.
River and Harbors Act (Section 10)	N/A	Note not provided.
Marine Protection, Research and Sanctuaries Act	N/A	Note not provided.
Marine Mammal Protection Act	N/A	Note not provided.

National Marine Sanctuaries Act	N/A	Note not provided.
Migratory Bird Treaty Act	N/A	Note not provided.
Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act	N/A	Note not provided.
Clean Air Act	N/A	Note not provided.
Other Applicable Environmental Compliance Laws or Regulations	N/A	This activity is covered by the Council's NEPA Categorical Exclusion for planning, research or design activities (Section 4(d)(3) of the Council's NEPA Procedures).

Maps, Charts, Figures

Caption : Figure 1 depicts the THRP boundary which includes all 5-digit HUC8 watersheds that flow to the Gulf of America.



Caption : Figure 2 depicts the THRP boundary with all 5-digit HUC8 watersheds that flow to the Gulf of America shows designated MFLs for rivers, lakes, springs, wetlands and estuaries within the program boundaries.

Other Uploads

GIS Data_2:
Florida_Gulf_Coast_Tributaries_Hydrologic_Restoration_Program_V2.gdb.zip
Caption : N/A

Council Staff Review: Florida Gulf Coast Tributaries Hydrologic Restoration Program

FPL Internal Staff Review

Project/Program	Florida Gulf Coast Tributaries Hydrologic Restoration Program		
Primary Reviewer	Matt Love	Sponsor	Florida
EC Reviewer	John Ettinger	Co-Sponsor	N/A

1. Is/Are the selected Priority Criteria supported by information in the proposal?	Yes
Notes	This is a continuation of an existing FPL funded program.

2. Does the proposal meet the RESTORE Act geographic eligibility requirement?	Yes
Notes	

3. Are the Comprehensive Plan primary goal and primary objective supported by information in the proposal?	Yes
Notes	

4. Planning Framework: If the proposal is designed to align with the Planning Framework, does the proposal support the selected priority approaches, priority techniques, and/or geographic area?	Yes
Notes	

5. Does the proposal align with the applicable RESTORE Council definition of project or program?	Yes
Notes	

6. Does the budget narrative adequately describe the costs associated with the proposed activity?	Yes
Notes	

7. Have three external BAS reviews been completed and has the proposal sponsor provided their response?	Yes
Notes	Florida applied BAS reviews that were completed upon the original proposal in Funded Priorities List 3b. This is justified due to the methods remaining largely the same and the scientific integrity of the program potentially increasing, but not decreasing.

8. Have appropriate metrics been proposed to support all primary and secondary goals?	Yes
Notes	

9. Environmental compliance: If FPL Category 1 has been selected for the implementation component of the project or program, does the proposal include environmental compliance documentation that fully supports the selection of Category 1?	N/A
Notes	Implementation funds in FPL Category 2. (EC section does not describe Cat 2 to Cat 1 process, but it is sufficiently described in budget narrative.

Best Available Science Review: Florida Gulf Coast Tributaries Hydrologic Restoration Program

This program was reviewed for BAS under FPL 3b. Under the 2026 FPL, Florida is proposing a continuation of the program.

The original BAS review as well as the state's response to the BAS comments can be found on the Council's 2026 FPL website.