



2023 Annual Report to Congress

Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council



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Fiscal Year 2023

Approved January 17, 2024

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1. Letter from the Executive Director

The Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (Council) hereby submits its Fiscal Year 2023 (FY 2023) Annual Report to Congress. The Council was created by the *Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities, and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States Act* (RESTORE Act or Act) in 2012 as an independent federal agency charged with administering a portion of the civil settlements associated with the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill. Consisting of the five Gulf Coast states and six federal agencies, the Council's mission is to implement a Comprehensive Plan for the ecological and economic recovery of the Gulf Coast.

The RESTORE Act dedicated 80% of all Clean Water Act (CWA) administrative and civil penalties arising from the *Deepwater Horizon* (DWH) oil spill to the Gulf Coast Restoration Trust Fund (Trust Fund) and established the Council as an independent entity within the Federal government. The Council was formally established in 2012 with the mission of implementing a long-term, comprehensive plan for the ecological and economic recovery of the Gulf Coast region. The Council approves projects and programs for funding under the Council-Selected Restoration Component of the RESTORE Act as set forth in Funded Priorities Lists (FPLs), as well as projects and programs under the Spill Impact Component of the RESTORE Act as set forth in State Expenditure Plans. The Council develops FPLs through collaboration among its members and with feedback from stakeholders across the Gulf; State Expenditure Plans are developed by individual Council state members. In FY 2023, the Council awarded more than \$252.83M, bringing the total amount awarded by the Council to \$919.57M: \$308.10M under the Council-Selected Restoration Component, and \$611.42 M under the Spill Impact Component.

The [2022 Comprehensive Plan Update: Restoring the Gulf Coast's Ecosystem and Economy](#) (Comprehensive Plan Update) provided a review of the effectiveness of the 2017 Comprehensive Plan Commitment and Planning Support (CPS) FPL, concluding that the use of a small portion (\$20.8M) of the \$1.3B Council-Selected Restoration Component funds to advance its Comprehensive Plan commitments has successfully met the intended purpose. The Comprehensive Plan Update also provided a summary of highlights of the collaborative activities. Based on this analysis and continuing member need, in FY 2023 the Council proposed extending the CPS FPL for an additional five-year period (through 2029) which would allow Council members to apply for up to \$350,000 per year in additional funding. As part of the proposed amendment, the Council is proposing to update its reporting requirements for members from semi-annual to annual financial and progress summaries.

The Council also worked diligently during FY 2023 to improve its grants management processes through the evaluation of strategies that reduce the time it takes to review and make financial awards while maintaining high-performance standards. While this is an ongoing effort, specific steps have been taken to increase efficiencies and effectiveness of recipient capabilities. A significant effort in FY 2023 towards supporting this goal was the implementation of a 2-day in-person grants training in November 2022 to provide Council members training on grants processes and address grants administration issues. A total of 27 staff from Council members attended the training. Evaluation of internal processes was also a component of this effort, including evaluating optimal staff work responsibilities, which in FY 2023 included updating the organizational structure and the hiring of leadership positions to replace staff who retired early in FY 2023. Given the increased grants workload, the Council approved the addition of two new grant positions in early FY 2024.

As the Council continues to work towards achieving the goals and objectives of the Comprehensive Plan in order to advance its vision of a “healthy and productive Gulf ecosystem achieved through collaboration on strategic restoration projects and programs,” it emphasizes sound management of its funding and resources. This is evidenced by the Financial Statement Audit completed on November 15, 2022, that resulted in an unmodified opinion with no material weaknesses or significant deficiencies and a finding that the financial statements presented the financial position of the Council fairly, in all material respects for the ninth year in a row. Further, the Council had a successful outcome of the sixth evaluation of its information security program and practices. The Council takes great pride in implementing internal controls over the effectiveness and efficiency of operations, reliable financial reporting, and compliance with applicable laws and regulations to ensure operational effectiveness are operating effectively at the highest federal standards.

On behalf of the Council, I am pleased to submit the FY 2023 Annual Report to Congress outlining our progress over the past twelve months. The Council remains committed to maintaining active communication with Congress. Please contact us at any time with your thoughts, suggestions or questions. Thank you for your continued leadership and support in restoring the Gulf Coast region.

Mary S. Walker
Executive Director

2. Background on the RESTORE Act

The Gulf Coast environment was significantly damaged by the 2010 Deepwater Horizon (DWH) oil spill disaster. In an effort to advance environmental and economic recovery from the spill, Congress enacted the [RESTORE Act](#) (33 U.S.C §1321(t) and *note*) in July 2012, which amended the CWA and created the Council as well as the Trust Fund. Pursuant to the Act, the Trust Fund receives 80 percent of the civil and administrative penalties assessed under the CWA resulting from the 2010 DWH oil spill. The Council is 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. The individuals listed below represent the Council members for the 2023 reporting year.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (Chair)
Michael Regan
Administrator

State of Alabama Kay Ivey Governor	U.S. Department of Agriculture Tom Vilsack Secretary
State of Florida Ron DeSantis Governor	U.S. Department of the Army Michael L. Conner Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works
State of Louisiana John Bel Edwards Governor	U.S. Department of Commerce Gina Raimondo Secretary
State of Mississippi Tate Reeves Governor	U.S. Department of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas Secretary
State of Texas Greg Abbott Governor	U.S. Department of the Interior Deb Haaland Secretary

The Council administers the expenditure of 60% of the funds deposited in the Trust Fund (Figure 1). The majority of the Trust Fund’s receipts are from BP Exploration & Production Inc. (“BP”) over a 15-year period ending in 2031, pursuant to a 2016 settlement among the United States, the five Gulf states and BP. Funding for RESTORE projects is limited to amounts available in the Trust Fund. A history of the civil penalties can be found in previous [AFRs](#) on the [Council’s website](#) and the [2022 Comprehensive Plan Update](#).

Under the Council-Selected Restoration Component of the Act, 30% of available funding is administered for Gulfwide ecosystem restoration and protection through Funded Priority Lists (FPL) developed in collaboration among the members of the Council. The Council-Selected Restoration Component funding decisions are guided by criteria set forth in the RESTORE Act, the Council’s [Initial Comprehensive Plan: Restoring the Gulf Coast’s Ecosystem and Economy](#) (2013 Initial Comprehensive Plan), the [2016 and 2022 Comprehensive Plan Updates: Restoring the Gulf Coast’s Ecosystem and Economy](#) (2016 Comprehensive Plan Update; 2022 Comprehensive Plan Update), and other policies, including the Council’s [2019 Planning Framework](#). The remaining 30% is allocated to the states under the Spill Impact Component of the Act, according to a formula and regulation approved by the Council in December 2015. Spill Impact Component funds are spent according to individual State Expenditure Plans (SEPs), developed by each state Council member, that contribute to the overall economic and ecological recovery of the Gulf. The SEPs must adhere to criteria set forth in the Act and are subject to approval by the Council chair in accordance with those criteria.

Figure 1: Allocation of the Gulf Coast Restoration Trust Fund based on settlements with BP, Transocean and Anadarko; RESTORE Council oversight components are highlighted in green.



2.1 RESTORE Council Goals and Objectives

RESTORE Council Goals

Restoring an area as large and complex as the Gulf Coast region is a costly, multi-generational undertaking. Gulf habitats are also 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 pollution and

hydrologic alterations spanning multiple states and involving the watersheds of large and small rivers alike. Stocks of marine and estuarine species are depleted by over-utilization and conflicting resource use. Some 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 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 has adopted five goals.

- **Restore and Conserve Habitat** – Restore and conserve the health, diversity, and resilience of key coastal, estuarine, and marine habitats.
- **Restore Water Quality and Quantity** – Restore and protect the water quality and quantity of the Gulf Coast region's fresh, estuarine, and marine waters.
- **Replenish and Protect Living Coastal and Marine Resources** – Restore and protect healthy, diverse, and sustainable living coastal and marine resources.
- **Enhance Community Resilience** – Build upon and sustain communities with capacity to adapt to short- and long-term changes.
- **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. This goal pertains to expenditures by the Gulf Coast states authorized in the RESTORE Act under the Direct Component (administered by the Department of the Treasury) and the Spill Impact Component and ensures that these investments can be considered in the context of comprehensive restoration. This goal does not apply to the Council-Selected Restoration Component.

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 will support ecosystem restoration that builds local workforce capacity.

The Council coordinates restoration activities under the Council-Selected Restoration Component and the Spill Impact Component to further the goals. While the Council does not have direct involvement in the activities undertaken by the States or local governments through the Direct Component, the Council will strive, as appropriate, to coordinate its work with those activities. In addition, the Council actively coordinates with the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Science Program (administered by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) and the Centers of Excellence Research Grants Program (administered by the Treasury Department).

RESTORE Council Objectives

The Council selects and funds projects and programs that restore and protect the natural resources, ecosystems, water quality, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches, and coastal wetlands of the Gulf Coast region. Projects and programs that are not aligned with the scope of the following objectives for ecosystem restoration will not be funded under the Council-Selected Restoration Component.

- **Restore, Enhance, and Protect Habitats** – Restore, enhance, and protect the extent, functionality, resiliency, and sustainability of coastal, freshwater, estuarine, wildlife, and marine habitats.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **Promote Natural Resource Stewardship and Environmental Education** – Promote and enhance natural resource stewardship through environmental education efforts that include formal and informal educational opportunities, professional development and training, communication, and actions for all ages.
- **Improve Science-Based Decision-Making Processes** – Improve science-based decision-making processes used by the Council.

2.2 Fiscal Year 2023 Significant Council Actions

The RESTORE Act (33 U.S.C. § 1321(t) and *note*) requires a Council vote for the following types of actions (referred to as “Significant Actions”) (33 U.S.C § 1321(t)(2)(C)(vi)):

1. Approval of the Comprehensive Plan and revisions and updates thereto;
2. Approval of State Expenditure Plans (SEPs) and revisions and updates thereto;
3. Approval of reports to Congress required by the Act;
4. Approval of transfers pursuant to 33 U.S.C. § 1321(t)(2)(E)(ii)(II); and
5. Other Significant Actions as determined by the Council (e.g., approval of the Council regulation establishing the formula required under 33 U.S.C. § 1321(t)(3)).

All Significant Actions of the Council, except approval of SEPs, require the affirmative vote of the Chairperson and three State members to be effective. Approval of a SEP or a SEP revision requires only the affirmative vote of the Chairperson together with certification that the SEP satisfies all applicable requirements of the RESTORE Act by the submitting State member. Following is a list of the Council’s Significant Actions for FY 2023:

Council-Selected Restoration Component

- January 2023 approval of an amendment to FPL 1 for funding for the Money Bayou Florida Wetlands Restoration (Implementation) project sponsored by NOAA.

- March 2023 approval of FPL amendment bundle which included implementation of Bahia Grande Wetland System Restoration Project sponsored by NOAA in FPL 1 and an amendment to FPL 3 for the Louisiana CPRA River Reintroduction into Maurepas Swamp.
- August 2023 approval of an amendment to FPL 3 for implementing funding for the Coastal Alabama Regional Water Quality Program: City of Fairhope Sanitary Sewer Overflow Mitigation Project located in Alabama.

Spill Impact Component

- April 2023 approval of Florida SEP Amendment #5
- May 2023 approval of Mississippi SEP Amendment-2022

Other

- Approval of 2022 Annual Report to Congress, March 2023

2.3 Sub-Awards to Non-Governmental Organizations

The RESTORE Act requires that, for purposes of awards made under the Council-Selected Restoration Component, a State or federal award recipient may make a grant or subaward to or enter into a cooperative agreement with a non-governmental entity that equals or exceeds 10 percent of the total amount of the award provided to the State or federal award recipient only if certain notice requirements are met. The Council must provide notice in advance of each such proposed subaward during a fiscal year through the Federal Register and to specified Congressional Committees. In addition, the Council must include the name, purpose and amount of each qualifying subaward in its Annual Report to Congress. No awards met this criterion during FY 2023.

3. Council-Selected Restoration Component

3.1 Background

Under the Council-Selected Restoration Component of the Act, only Council members are eligible to submit proposals for funding. Council approval of funding requires the affirmative vote of at least three state members and the Chair. The other five federal members do not formally vote on Council funding. The Council uses FPLs that set forth approved projects and programs. The Council develops FPLs through collaboration among its members and with feedback from stakeholders across the Gulf.

Funds for approved FPL projects are disbursed to Council members via grants to state members and interagency agreements (IAAs) with federal members. As part of the grant and IAA process, all activities for which funding is sought are carefully reviewed to ensure consistency with the approved FPL and compliance with the RESTORE Act and all other applicable requirements, including compliance with all applicable federal environmental laws and the application of best available science criteria (BAS) as required by the Act and further defined by the Council. A detailed description of the full awarding process for the Council-Selected Component and subsequent Funded Priority Lists are found in the 2022 Updated Comprehensive Plan and previous [Annual Reports to Congress](#) found on the [Council Website](#).

In selecting projects and programs under the Council-Selected Restoration Component, the RESTORE Act requires that the Council give the highest priority to activities that address one or more of the following criteria:

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

In the 2022 Comprehensive Plan Update, the Council describes its progress toward its commitments thus far and builds upon these commitments by highlighting the importance of efficient, effective, and transparent environmental compliance. The Council's updated commitments are:

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

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 Trust Fund will be allocated for the succeeding ten years (the "Ten-Year Funding Strategy"). In the 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.

In the 2022 Comprehensive Plan Update, the Council reconfirmed its conclusion that a clear and concise vision statement can help direct and shape future funding decisions. The Council's vision for restoration is as follows:

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

The Council continues to believe 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

A major challenge to Gulf-wide ecosystem restoration is coordinating efforts within each state, among Council members, stakeholders, and across the Gulf restoration efforts to support personnel, travel, and logistics necessary for more effective collaboration and planning. In 2018, funding was approved in a second FPL “Funded Priorities List: Comprehensive Plan Commitment and Planning Support” (2017 CPS FPL) to address this challenge. Each of the eleven Council members were able to apply for up to \$2.1M over a five-year period beginning in 2018 through 2023. Specifically, the funding provided funds necessary for members to:

- Strengthen ecosystem restoration proposals for future FPL(s) under the Council-Selected Restoration Component;
- Enhance the efficiency of future FPL development processes; and
- Facilitate long-term planning and leveraging efforts across funding streams.

The 2022 Comprehensive Plan update provided a review of the effectiveness of the CPS FL, concluding that the use of a small portion (\$20.8M of funding to date) of its total Council-Selected Restoration Component funds to advance its Comprehensive Plan commitments has successfully met the intended purpose and provided a summary of highlights of the collaborative activities. A summary of the use of CPS funds can be found in the 2022 Comprehensive Plan and in the 2022 [Annual Report to Congress](#).

Based on the analysis referenced above and continuing member need, in September, the Council proposed to extend the CPS FPL to allow Council members to apply for up to \$350,000 per year in additional funding for the next five years (Table 1). It is important to note that, under the RESTORE Act and the US Department of Treasury’s implementing regulations, only RESTORE Council members may apply for Bucket 2 funds.

Table 1. Funding for the Commitments and Planning Support activities

Annual per member (maximum)	Annual Total Council Cap	CPS FPL	Total 5-Year Investment Maximum based on Annual Cap	Percentage of Total Bucket 2 Funds
\$500K for 3 Years	\$5.5M/year for 3 years	2017 CPS FPL	\$23.1M	1.44%
\$300k for 2 Years	\$3.3M/year for 2 years	2017 CPS FPL		
\$350k for 5 years	\$3.85M/year for 5 years	2023 Draft CPS FPL Amendment	\$19.25M	1.20%
		TOTAL	\$42.35M	2.64%*

* Calculated based upon total funds provided by BP and other responsible parties; it does not include interest. Therefore, the percentage will be less over time as interest is accrued.

This proposed amendment to the 2017 CPS FPL required public notice and a Council vote. As part of this proposed amendment, the Council proposed to update its reporting requirements for members from semi-annual to annual financial and progress summaries. The Council sought public comment on a draft amendment to the 2017 Comprehensive Plan Commitment and Planning Support (CPS) Funded Priorities List (FPL for a 30-day public comment period beginning on July 20, 2023, and concluding at 11:59 pm (CST) on August 19, 2023. A total of five comments were received. On October 4th, 2023, the Council voted to approve the amendment to the CPS FPL.

3.2 Funded Priority List Accomplishments FY 2023

A detailed description of the full awarding process for the Council-Selected Component and subsequent Funded Priority Lists are found in the 2022 Updated Comprehensive Plan and previous [Annual Reports to Congress](#) found on the [Council Website](#).

Over the eight-year period of FY 2016 to FY 2023, a total of \$308.1M has been awarded through the Council-Selected Restoration Component through grants, Interagency Agreements (IAA) and amendments. During FY 2023, a total of \$37.1M was awarded through three projects from FPL1 (Table 2) and four projects from FPL 3 (Table 3).

Table 2: List of FPL 1 awards made during FY 2023.

Council Member	FPL 1 Projects Approved during FY 2023	Award Amount (\$ M)
Mississippi	Deer Island Beneficial Use Site Implementation	\$3.0
Alabama	Marsh Restoration in Oyster Bay	\$0.7
DOC/NOAA	Marsh Restoration in Fish River and Weeks Bay	\$1.6
FY 2023 Total		\$5.3

Table 3: List of FPL 3 awards made during FY 2023

Council Member	FPL 3 Projects Approved during FY 2023	Award Amount (\$ M)
AL	Enhancing Hydrologic Connectivity in Justin's Bay (Mobile Bay)	\$1.0
MS	Water Quality Improvement Program for Coastal Mississippi Waters	\$6.85
DOI	Gulf Coast Tribal Youth Conservation Program	\$0.93
USDA	Enhancing Gulf Waters Through Forested Watershed Restoration	\$23.0
FY 2023 Total		\$31.78

4. Spill Impact Component

In addition to the Council-Selected Restoration Component, the remaining 30 percent of the Trust Fund under the Council’s purview is allocated to the states under the Spill Impact Component, or “Bucket 3,” according to a formula established by the Council and implemented through the [RESTORE Act Spill](#)

[Impact Component Allocation regulation](#) which was published on December 15, 2015. These allocations became effective on April 12, 2016, following the entry of the Consent Decree. Using the information set forth in the rule, the allocation of funds among the five states is:

- Alabama – 20.40%
- Florida – 18.36%;
- Louisiana – 34.59%;
- Mississippi – 19.07%; and
- Texas – 7.58%.

Spill Impact Component funds are spent according to individual State Expenditure Plans (SEPs) developed by each state member (in Florida, by the Gulf Consortium) that set forth programs contributing to the overall economic and ecological recovery of the Gulf. In 2016 the Council updated the [Guidelines](#) that describe required SEP elements, the process for submitting SEPs, and the criteria set forth in the Act under which the Council Chair must approve or disapprove SEPs.

Funds for projects in approved SEPs are disbursed to the state Council members (in Florida, to the Gulf Consortium) via grants when the requisite funds become available in the Trust Fund. As with the Council-Selected Restoration Component, all activities for which Spill Impact component funding is sought are carefully reviewed to ensure consistency with the applicable SEP and compliance with the RESTORE Act and all other applicable requirements, including the use of Best Available Science, and compliance with all applicable federal environmental laws.

Over the eight-year period of FY 2016 to FY 2023, a total of \$611.42 has been awarded through the Spill Impact Component through grants and amendments. During FY 2023, nine grants totaling \$15.8M (Table 4) were awarded.

Table 4: State Expenditure Plan total funds by state and list of projects approved during FY 2023.

Mississippi

SEP Projects Approved during FY 2023	Award Amount (\$Ms)
Public / Private Partnership (Accelerate MS)	\$2.2
Gulf Coast Center of Security and Emerging Technology (CSET) Program	\$5.24
FY 2023 Total	\$7.44

Florida Consortium

SEP Projects Approved during FY 2023	Award Amount (\$ Ms)
10-3: Keaton Beach and Steinhatchee Boat Ramps By-Pass	\$0.38
13-3: Artificial Reef Program – Implementation	\$1.25
10-1: Spring Warrior – Acquisition	\$0.62
16-3: Land Acquisition for Floodplain Restoration and Resiliency	\$3.37
6-1: St. Joseph Bay/Chipola River Sewer Improvement Program	\$0.89
3-5: Veterans Park Living Shoreline Construction	\$1.62
FY 2023 Total	\$8.14

Texas

SEP Projects Approved during FY 2023	Award Amount (\$ Ms)
FY22 RESTORE NBT-IB MAGEE BEACH PARK (BKT 3)	\$0.25

5. Summary of Council Performance

5.1 Assessment of the Council’s Progress Toward Program Goals

Ecosystems are subjected to both natural and human alterations that act together as “stressors” and affect natural ecosystem structure and function. The more ecosystems are stressed, the less resilient they may be to even larger, global challenges. With its approval of the 2015 Initial FPL, 2020 FPL 3a, and 2021 FPL 3b, the Council has approved funding for several programs that are intended to address large-scale ecosystem stressors that result in water quality impairment, coastal habitat loss and degradation, and coastal resilience challenges.

The use of a watershed/estuary-based approach for comprehensive ecological restoration was captured as a fundamental component of the 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update following completion of the 2015 Initial FPL, which included funding in 10 key watersheds. Many stakeholders cautioned the Council against distributing the available funds in a way that supports disconnected (although beneficial) restoration projects; the Council was asked not to engage in “random acts of restoration.” The Council shares that perspective and believes that focusing on watersheds and other foundational activities will ensure that the funds are spent in a way that contributes to comprehensive Gulf restoration. Taking a holistic approach to restoration recognizes the interconnected nature of coastal and marine ecosystems (a fundamental organizational principle of watersheds/estuaries) and the importance of addressing system-wide stressors that reduce ecosystem integrity. Moving forward, the Council will continue to use this holistic approach in order to maximize project benefits and track outcomes.

The RESTORE Act requires the Council 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. Each proposed project or program is evaluated as described in the FY 2023 [AFR](#) on the [Council’s website](#) and the [2022 Comprehensive Plan Update](#).

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.

Over the eight fiscal years of 2016 through 2023, a total of 170 awards were made (Table 5) with 16 new awards made during FY 2023. A total of 55 awards have now been made under FPL 1, 10 awards under the CPS FPL, 13 through FPL 3, and 92 SEP awards. As of the end of FY 2023, the Council has approved over \$308.1M for Council-Selected Restoration Component activities, either through approval of, or amendments to, FPLs 1, 2 and 3; \$611.42 M has been awarded under the Spill Impact Component. Table 5 shows the breakdown of these funds for each approved FPL, as well for those awarded through the Spill Impact Component. A detailed description of the full awarding process for the Council-Selected Component and subsequent Funded Priority Lists are found in the [2022 Updated Comprehensive Plan](#) and previous [Annual Reports to Congress](#) found on the [Council Website](#).

Table 5: Number of grants to state members by program and fiscal year (2016 to 2023)

Fiscal Year	FPL 1	CPS (FPL2)	FPL 3	SEP	Total
2016	2			2	4
2017	21			2	23
2018	15	9		4	28
2019	8	1		5	14
2020	3			39	42
2021	3		1	16	20
2022			8	15	24
2023	3		4	9	16
Total Number Awards	55	10	13	92	170
Total Funding Approved (millions)	\$175.6M	\$20.83M	\$111.7M	\$611.42M	\$919.57M

The number of awards and funding levels provides only a partial view of the grant-related workload. Now that the Council has been awarding grants and IAAs over eight fiscal years, many of the members have requested no-cost extensions and other non-monetary changes to their awards which require significant staff time. As shown in Table 6, the number of non-monetary grant actions has increased

significantly. Further, with the costs of projects increasing due to delays from the pandemic and other significant cost increases, many members have requested monetary amendments to their original award to cover these increase activity-level costs. In FY 2023, a total of 96 grant actions were completed with 16 new awards and 80 amendments (non-monetary and monetary amendments and closeout of awards).

Table 6: Number of grant-related actions by fiscal year (2016 to 2023), including number of new awards, non-monetary and monetary amendments, and closeout of financial awards.

Fiscal Year	New Awards	Non-Monetary Amendment	Monetary Amendment	Closeouts	Total Grant Actions
2016	4	2			6
2017	23	4			27
2018	28	11			39
2019	14	14			28
2020	42	32	2		75
2021	20	25		1	46
2022	23	34	9		66
2023	16	42	26	12	96
Total Number Awards	170	164	37	13	383

A total of 85.3 percent of all RESTORE Council funding awarded through the Council-Selected and Spill Impact Components are supporting the Restore and Conserve Habitat goal (60.4%) and Restore Water Quality and Quantity goal (24.8%) over the past eight years (Figure 2).

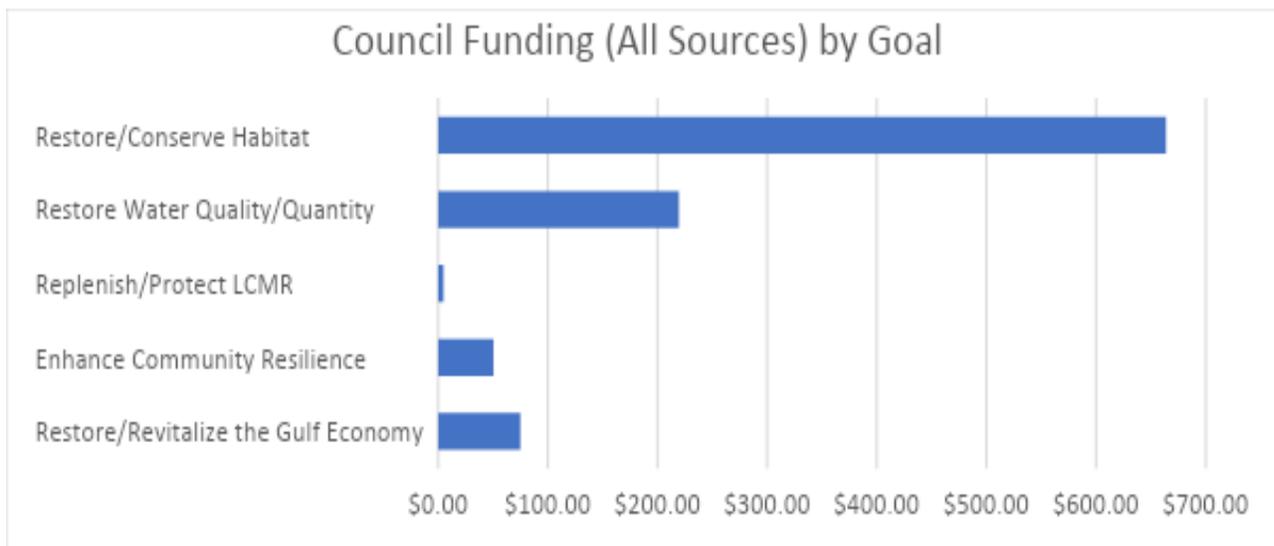


Figure 2. Funding trends for state and federal members (all sources, excluding the 2017 CPS FPL and award for preparing State Expenditure Plans) in support of the Council’s Comprehensive Goals through September 18, 2023.

The Council Selected Restoration Component has provided \$308.10M in funding through FY 2023. The Spill Impact component provides grant funds to the state Council members, with a total of \$611.42M awarded over this seven-year period.

Funding trends in millions of dollars by the eight fiscal years for which funding has been awarded to Council members are shown in Figure 3 for all funding sources (Council-Selected and Spill Impact Components) in support of the Council’s goal to Restore and Conserve Habitat, while the Restore Water Quantity and Quality funding trends by year are provided in Figure 4.

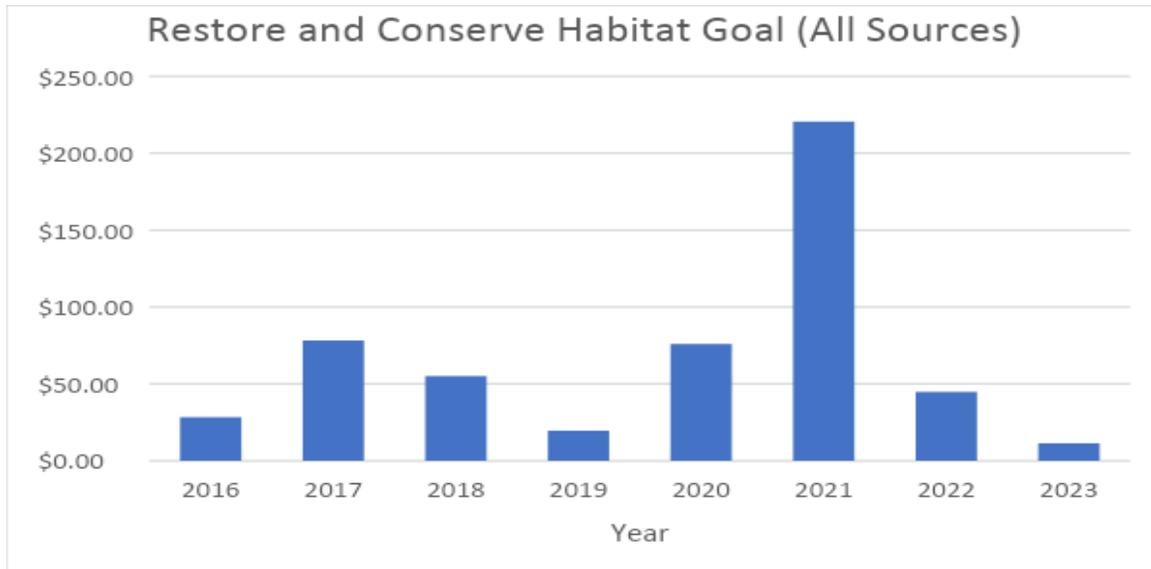


Figure 3: Funding (millions \$) trends for grants and IAA’s from Council Selected and Spill Impact Components (excluding the 2017 CPS FPL and awards for preparing State Expenditure Plans) in support of the Restore and Conserve Habitat goal by fiscal year. This figure includes funds awarded as of September 18, 2023



Figure 4: Funding (\$ millions) trends for grants and IAA’s from Council Selected and Spill Impact Components (excluding the 2017 CPS FPL and awards for preparing State Expenditure Plans) in support of the Restore and Conserve Water Quality and Quantity goal by fiscal year. This figure includes funds awarded as of September 18, 2023.

To assess Council progress, the categorization by each of the Comprehensive Plan Objectives for the projects and programs funded under the Council-Selected Restoration Component through FY 2023 (FPLs 1, 2 and 3) provides an overview of the Council’s funding priorities to date. Over 86 percent of funds awarded (Figure 5) went to support the following two objectives: Restore, enhance and protect habitats (71.1%, \$200.8M), and Restore, improve and protect water resources (14.3%, \$41M).

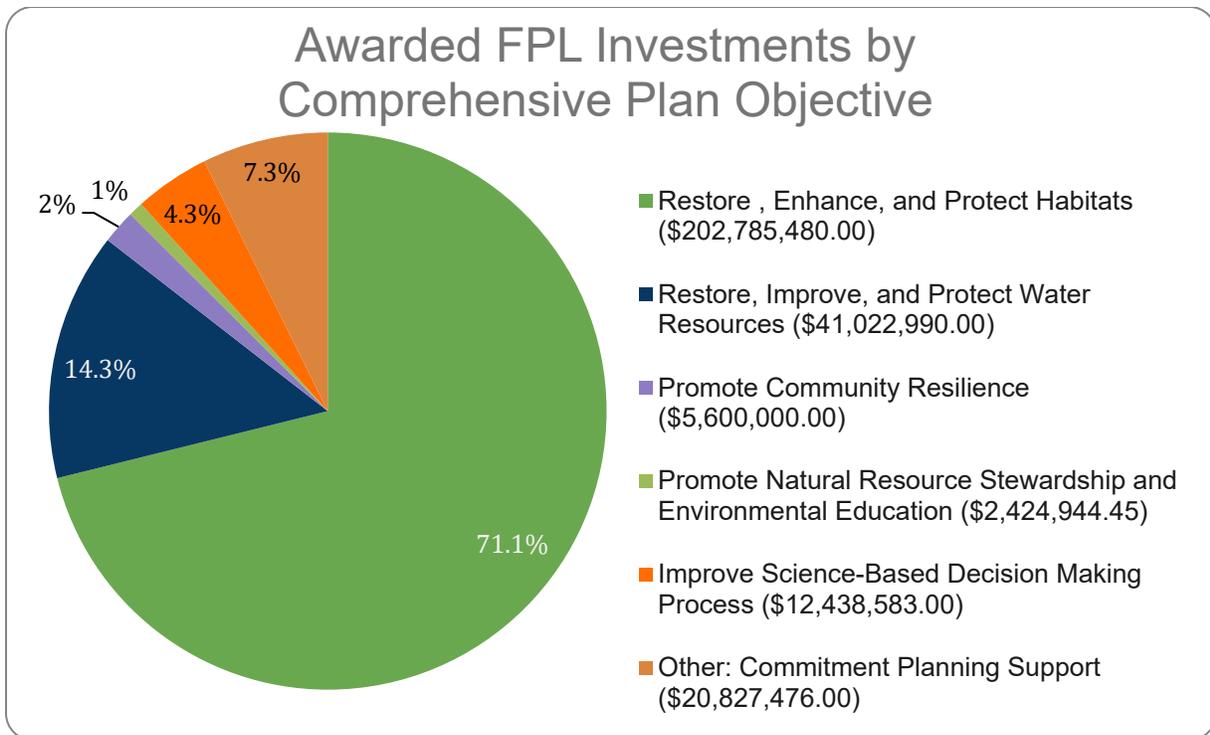


Figure 5. 2015 Initial FPL, 2017 CPS FPL, 2020/2021 FPL 3 funds by Comprehensive Plan Objective. This Figure includes funds awarded as of September 18, 2023. *Note: The “Improve science-based decision-making processes” objective is cross-cutting and is sometimes used as an approach to support other objectives. For example, in the 2015 Initial FPL, some monitoring activities were funded to primarily benefit the “Restore, enhance, and protect habitats” objective.*

The Spill Impact Component funding through FY 2023 can also be parsed by the Council’s Objectives to identify primary funding priorities (Figure 6). While SEP projects funded a broader number of Council Objectives, the following three objectives account for nearly 81 percent of SEP funding: Restore, Enhance and Protect Habitats (49.4%, \$293.9M); Restore, Improve and Protect Water Resources (20.3%, \$120.7M); and Promote Community Resilience (11.1%, \$66.2M). These same three Council Objectives also account for over 83 percent of all Council funding streams (Figure 7): Restore, Enhance and Protect Habitats (56.4%, \$496.7); Restore, Improve and Protect Water Resources (18.4%, \$161.7M); and Promote Community Resilience (8.2%, \$71.8M).

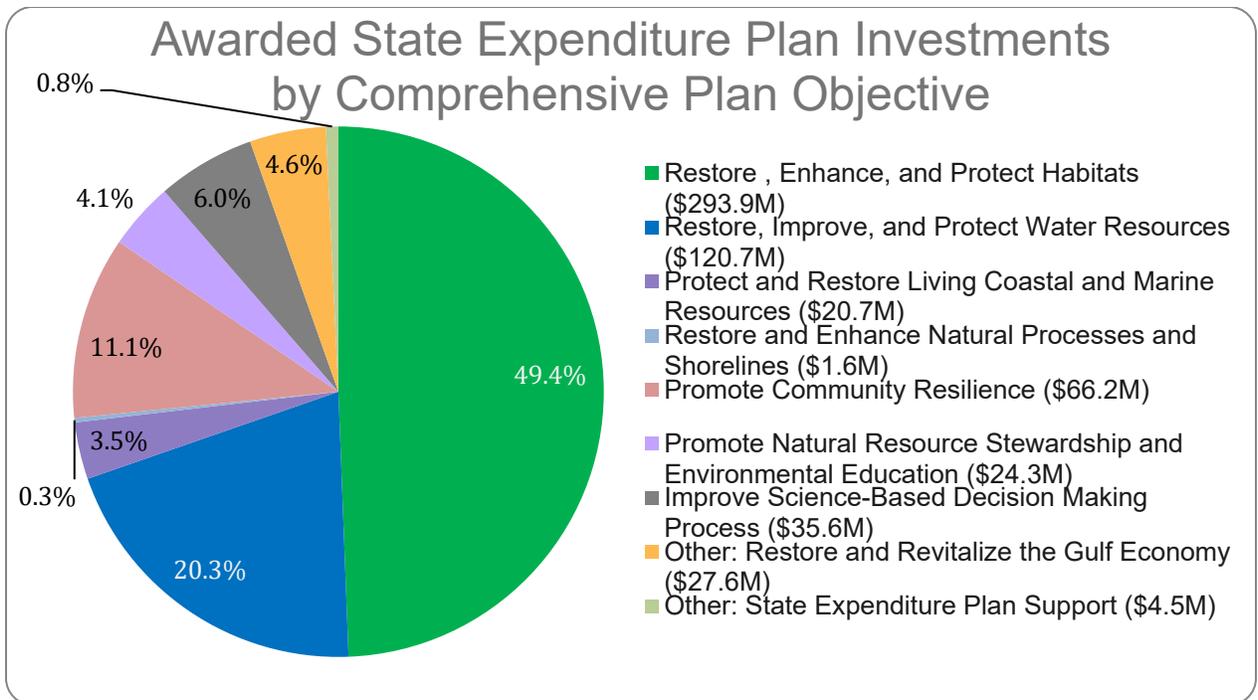


Figure 6. State Expenditure Plans awarded funds by Comprehensive Plan objectives. This figure includes funds awarded to all 5 states as of September 18, 2023

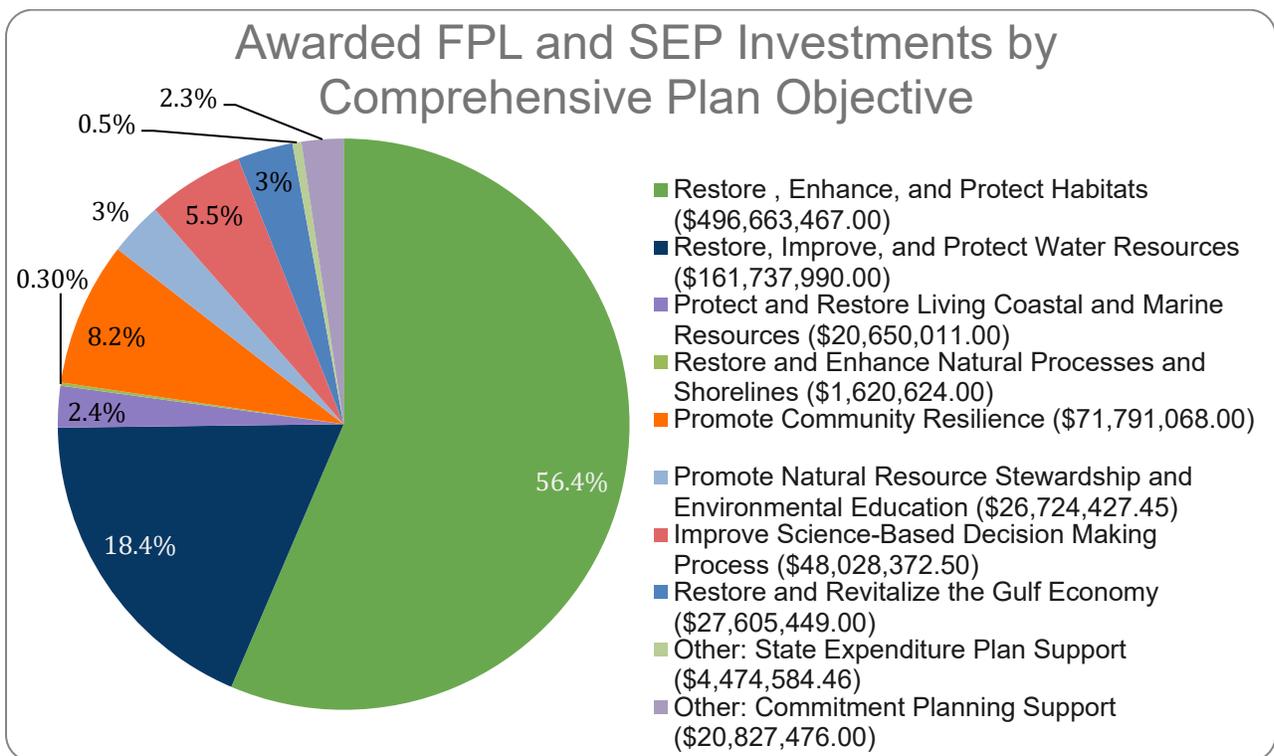


Figure 7. All Council-Selected Restoration and Spill Impact Components awarded funds by Comprehensive Plan objectives. This figure includes funds awarded as of September 18, 2023

Funding by Watershed

As the Council recognizes that ecosystem restoration investments may also improve prosperity and quality of life, this approach strives to both restore the Gulf Coast region's environment and simultaneously revitalize the region's economy. In addition, this approach acknowledges that coordinated action with other partners is crucial to successfully restore and sustain the health of the Gulf Coast region.

Ecosystems are subjected to both natural and human alterations that act together as "stressors" and affect natural ecosystem structure and function. The more ecosystems are stressed, the less resilient they may be to even larger, global challenges such as climate change. With its approval of 2021 FPL 3b, the Council has approved funding for several programs that are intended to address large-scale ecosystem stressors that result in water quality impairment, coastal habitat loss and degradation, and coastal resilience challenges.

The use of a watershed/estuary-based approach for comprehensive ecological restoration was captured as a fundamental component of the 2016 and 2022 Comprehensive Plan Updates. Linking projects to environmental stressors by watershed or estuary is scientifically sound and offers operational advantages which assist in leveraging ecosystem restoration program resources. A focus 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 this 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.

The allocation of funding by Gulf watershed/geographic area are shown in Figure 8. The watersheds/geographic areas that have received the most funding as a total of all funding sources, are the Lower Mississippi River (31.7%), Mobile/Perdido Bay (\$18.7%), and Mississippi Sound (16.1%).

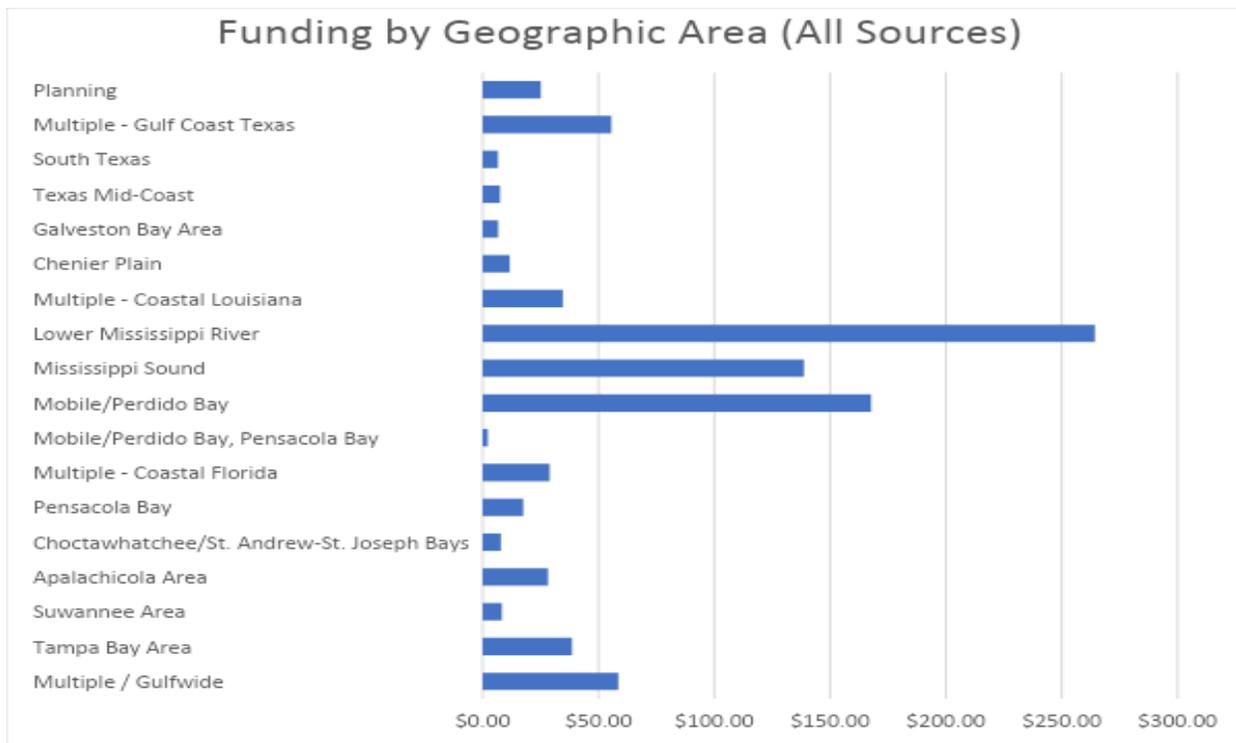


Figure 8: Distribution of funding for state and federal Council members from the Council-Selected Restoration and Spill Impact Components by watershed or geographic area. This figure includes funds awarded as of September 18, 2023.

5.2 Summary by Planning Framework Elements

One of the most significant actions the Council has taken to improve communication of performance was the development of the Council’s [Planning Framework, updated in 2023](#), which strategically links past and future restoration funding decisions to the overarching goals and objectives outlined in the Comprehensive Plan. The Planning Framework indicates priorities designed to continue building on previous investments, and strategically link past and future restoration funding decisions, and place them within the context of the Comprehensive Plan goals and objectives. A full description of the Planning Framework is provided in the 2022 Updated Comprehensive Plan and previous [Annual Reports to Congress](#) found on the [Council Website](#).

The Planning Framework provides a mechanism to view the primary approaches to ecosystem restoration of the Gulf being utilized by the members through the Council-Selected Restoration Component FPLs (Figure 9). To date (FY 2023), approaches being utilized include: Protect and Conserve Coastal, Estuarine, and Riparian habitats (34.5%, \$98M); Restore Hydrology and Natural processes (16%, \$47.4M); ; Reduce Excess Nutrients and Other Pollutants to Watersheds (8%, \$22.2M); Improve Science-based Decision-making Processes (12%, \$35.6M); Promote Natural Resource Stewardship and Environmental Education (9%, \$28.4M); Create, Restore and Enhance Coastal Wetlands, Islands, Shorelines, and Headlands (10%, \$27.6M); and Restore Oyster Habitat (2%, \$4.7M)..

Awarded FPL Investments by Approach

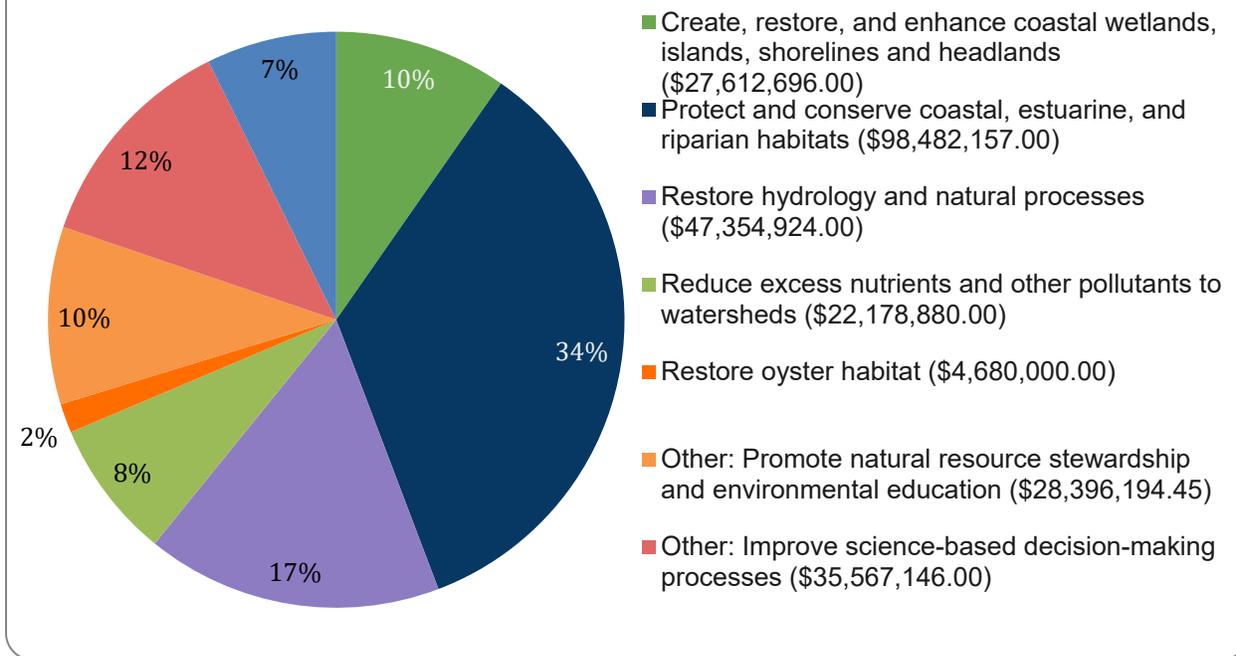


Figure 9: 2015 Initial FPL, 2017 CPS FPL, 2020/2021 FPL 3 funds by primary approach. This figure includes funds awarded as of September 18, 2023. *Note: The “Improve science-based decision-making process” approach is sometimes used to support other primary objectives. For example, in the 2015 Initial FPL, some monitoring activities were funded to primarily benefit the “Restore, enhance, and protect habitats” objective.*

The Planning Framework also provides a mechanism to view the primary approaches to ecosystem restoration of the Gulf being utilized by the members through the State Expenditure Plans (Figure 9). To date (FY 2023), there are four primary approaches being utilized that account for over 87 percent of the funds approved or budgeted, including: Restore Hydrology and Natural Processes (35%, \$210.1M); Reduce Excess Nutrients and other Pollutants to Watersheds (26%, \$151.4M); Create, Restore and Enhance Coastal Wetlands, Islands, Shorelines, and Headlands (\$15%, \$88.0M); and Restore and Revitalize Gulf Economy (11%, \$65.8M).

Awarded State Expenditure Plan Investments by Approach

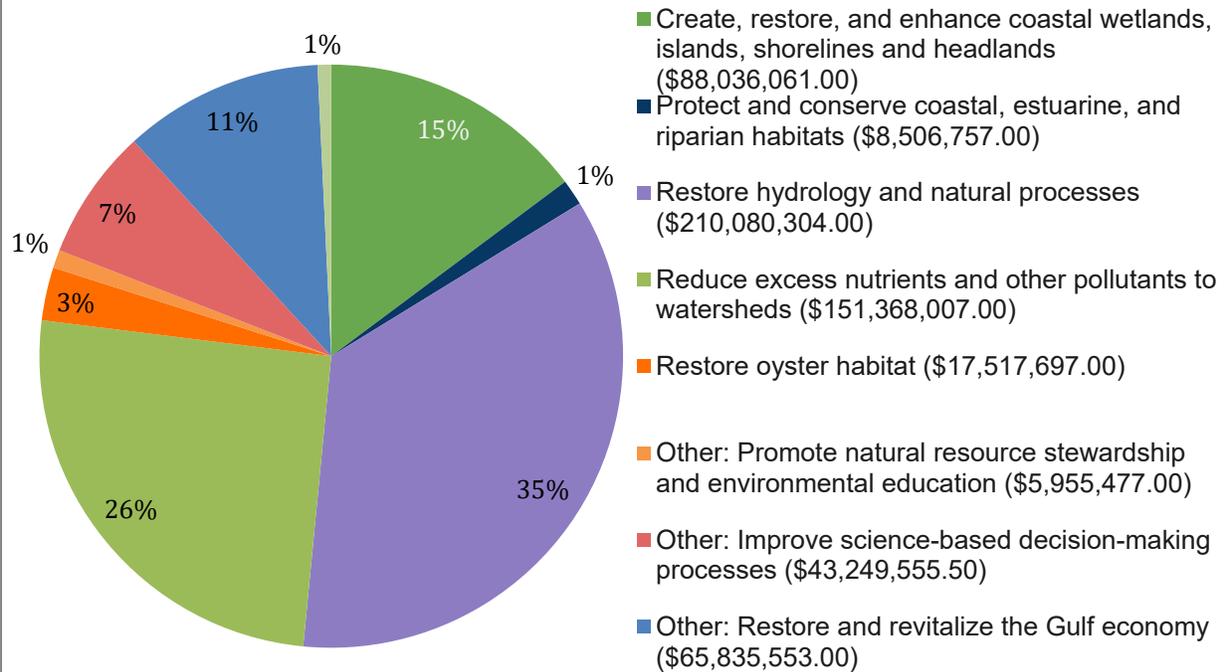


Figure 9. State Expenditure Plans awarded funds by Comprehensive Plan objectives. This figure includes funds awarded to all 5 states as of September 18, 2023.

5.3 Summary by Performance Metrics

Over its lifetime, the Council will invest over \$3 billion 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 which can be used to demonstrate the benefits of Council investments. The RESTORE 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. Understanding outcomes and impacts will further help to achieve tangible results and ensure that funds are invested in a meaningful way.

In the Comprehensive Plan, the Council has committed to delivering results, measuring impacts, and implementing/improving adaptive management. 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. The Council is also exploring opportunities to create consistency and collaborate with NRDA efforts where appropriate. For example, the intersection between the [Council Monitoring and Assessment Work Group \(CMAWG\)](#) efforts with the

NRDA Cross-Technical Implementation Group, and Monitoring and Adaptive Management Workgroup may yield important programmatic and science efficiencies.

Another element of the Council's commitment to measuring and ensuring success is the application of adaptive management strategies. 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, the Council intends to fulfill its commitment to utilize adaptive management processes to enhance the benefits of its work.

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.

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.

Members are required to monitor the performance of all projects funded by the Council toward ecosystem restoration. In 2021 the Council updated its [Observational Data Plan \(ODP\) Guidelines](#) to provide guidance to the Council's grant and IAA recipients on the selection of metrics, parameters and monitoring methodologies for Council funded activities. The Council has currently identified 61 [performance-level metrics that are organized by the Planning Framework restoration approaches and techniques being implemented by a project or program](#). These metrics are used to monitor and evaluate the efficacy of projects and programs in meeting the mission goals and objectives of the Council and track annual performance. Based on the Submission Guidelines and ODP Guidelines, metrics selected should be:

- Objective;
- Quantifiable;
- Accompanied by targets (success criteria);
- Consistent across program activities (e.g., water quality benefits);
- Identified in proposals with details provided in application ODPs; and
- Able to support the goals and objectives of the program or project.

The FPL and SEP projects funded during fiscal years, 2016, through 2023 are already achieving results (Table 7). The metric measurements are provided by the Council's Goals and subset by Objective. To date, Council funds have been used to acquire 11,689 acres of land (an increase of over 2,700 acres over FY 2022) and restore 6,038 acres of wetlands and 9,694 acres of non-wetland areas (an improvement of

4,035 acres and 3.284 acres, respectively from FY 2022 reported results), primarily in support of the Council’s goal to Restore and Conserve Habitat. It should be noted that most land acquisition and improved management practices also have direct connection to improving water quality and quantity. Council funds under Council-Selected Restoration and Spill Impact Components are being used to restore land, marine habitat, wetlands and remove invasive species (4,358 acres – an increase in 2,741 acres over FY 2022) which support the Council’s goal to Restore and Conserve Habitat. Funds invested through the Council-Selected Restoration and Spill Impact Components are also providing support for research and planning, monitoring activities, outreach and education, and providing economic benefits in support of the Council’s goal to Restore and Revitalize the Gulf Economy.

Table 7: Performance-level metrics results from projects funded under the Comprehensive Plan Component and Spill-Impact Component Funding. The information in the table summarizes the reported by FPL and SEP activities awarded to date. For each metric measure, the associated primary Comprehensive Plan goal, objective, and Planning Framework Restoration Technique are provided.

Goal: Restore and Conserve Habitat

Objective: Restore, Enhance and Protect Habitat – Technique: Land Acquisition

Metric Measure	Total (Increase from FY 2022)
Acres acquired in fee	11,689 (2,769)
Miles of shoreline acquired	14.5 (0)

Objective: Restore, Enhance and Protect Habitat – Technique: Habitat Management and Stewardship

Metric Measure	Total (Increase from FY 2022)
Agricultural best management practices (BMPs) - Acres under contracts/agreements	37,134
Removal of invasives - Acres restored	4,358 (2,741)
Habitat restoration (non-wetland) - Acres restored	9,694 (3,284)
Wetland restoration - Acres restored	6,038 (4,035)
Habitat restoration - Acres SAV restored	463 (240)

Objective: Restore, Enhance and Protect Habitat – Technique: Substrate placement

Metric Measure	Total (Increase from FY 2022)
Hydrologic restoration – Acres Restored	118 (new)
Habitat restoration - Oysters habitat	302 (0)

Goal: Restore Water Quality and Quantity

Objective: Restore, Improve and Protect Water Resources – Technique: Agriculture and forest management

Metric Measure	Total (Increase from FY 2022)
Erosion Control – acres restored to reduce surface and/or stream channel erosion	1,142 (707)

Goal: All

Objective: All – Technique: Planning

Metric Measure	Total (Increase from FY 2022)
Number of management plans developed	27 (15)

Objective: Improve Science-based Decision-Making Processes – Technique: Increase monitoring capacities

Metric Measure	Total (Increase from FY 2022)
Number of streams/sites being monitored	471 (23)
Acres being monitored	14,712,00 (1,275,000)

Objective: Promote Natural Resource Stewardship and Environmental Education – Technique: Promote Natural Resource Stewardship and Environmental Education

Metric Measure	Total (Increase from FY 2022)
Number of people enrolled to implement best management practices	414 (58)
Number of users engaged online	7,580 (0)
Number of participants that successfully completed training	606 (140)

Outreach through promoting natural resource stewardship and environmental education is an important component of the Council’s efforts as shown by 7,580 users engaged with online activities. While much of this work is ongoing, at the end of FY 2023 Council funded activities also resulted in the improvement of management practices on at least 37,134 acres through Best Management Practices (BMP). The Council is also improving science-based decision-making processes by supporting the completion of 31 management plans and monitoring over 14.7M acres and 471 sites across the Gulf. Of particular note regarding the number of acres being monitored, Council funds are being used to leverage other monitoring, assessment and data management programs including Louisiana’s 14.7M-acre Adaptive Management Program \$34M project for areas under the overarching umbrella of the System-Wide Assessment and Monitoring Program (SWAMP).

6. Administrative Accomplishments

6.1 Financial Summary

The Council remains dedicated to excellence in meeting all its federal fiduciary responsibilities as evidenced in the Financial Statement Audit completed on November 15, 2022, that resulted in an unmodified opinion with no material weaknesses or significant deficiencies and a finding that the financial statements presented the financial position of the Council fairly, in all material respects for the ninth year in a row.¹ The financial statements and financial data provided are derived from the accounting records of the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council. These statements are prepared to disclose the financial position, financial condition, and operating results, in accordance with the regulations of 31 U.S.C. § 3515(b). They also comply with the Federal generally accepted accounting principles (GAAP) and the formats prescribed by OMB. It is important for users to note that these statements pertain to a division of the U.S. Government.

The Council is funded in its entirety by the RESTORE Trust Fund and serves as an expenditure fund for the Trust Fund. It does not receive appropriated funds, and all funding is Category B mandatory funding. The Council's financial statements reflect the amount of funds available to and used by the Council. Table 8 below shows the current status of the trust fund components that are managed by the Council: The Council-Selected Restoration Component, and the Oil Spill Impact Component. The Council-Selected Administrative Funds and Council-Selected Program Expense Funds are subcategories of the Council-Selected Restoration Funds and are used by the Council to carry out its operations. The apportionments received by the Council are used to develop programs, carry out operations, and fund projects.

The Department of the Treasury issued an Interim Final Rule regarding the investment and use of amounts deposited in the Gulf Coast Restoration Trust Fund. Upon issuance of this Rule, the Council was able to request apportionments for the Council-Selected Restoration Component Funds. The Spill Impact Interim Final Rule published on August 22, 2014, made available an amount of funds less than or equal to the statutory minimum allocation (5% of funds available under the Spill Impact Component) that would be available to a Gulf Coast State or eligible entity for a SEP that funds planning activities only. On December 15, 2015, the Council published the RESTORE Act Spill Impact Component Allocation Final Rule which became effective on April 4, 2016, when the United States Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana entered the Consent Decree. This Rule established the formula for the allocation of Spill Impact Component funds to the States making these funds available for apportionment.

Table 7 shows the Council's trust fund apportionments received in fiscal years 2013 - 2023. Apportionment is an Office of Management and Budget-approved plan on how to spend resources provided by a mandatory appropriation, an annual or supplemental appropriation act, or a continuing resolution as well as other sources of funding such as a Trust Fund. An apportionment contains the amounts available for obligation and expenditure. It also specifies and limits what obligations can be done and what expenditures can be made during specified timeframes, for programs, projects, and activities, or any combination of these.

¹ OIG, *Audit of the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council's Financial Statements for Fiscal Years 2022 and 2021*, (OIG-23-008; November 15, 2022).

Table 8: Trust Fund Apportionments Received Summary

Trust Fund Balance (After Sequestration)	Council Selected Administrative Funds (6011)	Council Selected Projects and Programs Funds (6012)	TOTAL COMPREHENSIVE PLAN	SPILL IMPACT (6013)
TRUST FUND DEPOSITS	\$27,487,688	\$888,768,557	\$916,256,245	\$869,721,060
Apportionment FY13-19	7,843,581	212,355,348	220,198,929	193,810,001
Apportionment FY20	1,109,447	34,277,021	35,386,468	185,726,644
Apportionment FY21	1,734,224	146,361,378	148,095,602	73,623,810
Apportionment FY22	1,081,530	8,684,446	9,765,876	274,396,619
Apportionment FY23	1,599,375	138,351,431	139,950,806	97,882,816
Total Apportioned	13,368,157	540,029,624	553,397,681	825,439,890
TRUST FUND BALANCE	\$14,119,531	\$348,738,933	\$362,858,564	\$44,281,170

To best serve the communities of the Gulf Coast region, the Council strives to implement the Comprehensive Plan and accomplish the requirements of the RESTORE Act in an effective and efficient manner, at the minimum cost possible to maximize the funds available for restoration projects and programs. The Council has managed its fiscal resources through a strategy of incremental growth corresponding to the development of the Council-Selected Restoration Component and Spill Impact Component programs. The [FY 2023 Annual Financial Report](#) is posted on the Council’s website and provides detailed information on the five-year operational costs (summary and trends), Administrative Expenses, Project and Program costs, Costs Incurred, and other financial data.

6.2 Grants Management

Grants and Data Systems

RESTORE Council staff follow all federal financial laws and regulations, including the adoption of standardized data structures under the Grants Reporting Efficiency and Agreement Transparency Act of 2019 (GREAT Act), which continue to be refined over time. To address these anticipated changes, the Council intentionally selected a shared federal service provider, the Health and Human Services (HHS) GrantSolutions system, to manage grant and IAA award data. In addition, the Council’s Program Information Platform for Ecosystem Restoration (PIPER) system, which was developed under a Memorandum of Understanding with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), to collect, store and manage scientific and programmatic data that GrantSolutions is not designed to handle, is customizable as needed to address standardized data structures and requirements as these are developed and refined. On March 16, 2020, the Council deployed this “unified solution” after ensuring a complete migration of key award data to each system.

The Council also worked diligently during FY 2023 to improve its grants processes through the evaluation of strategies that reduce the time it takes to review and make financial awards. While this is an on-going effort, specific steps have been taken to increase efficiencies and effectiveness of recipient capabilities. A significant effort in FY 2023 towards supporting this goal was the implementation of a 2-day in-person grants training in November 2022 to provide Council members training on grants processes and address grants administration issues. A total of 27 staff from Council members attended the training. Evaluation of internal grant processes was also a component of this continuing effort to improve our grant-related services, including evaluating workload, staffing allocation and workflow.

Risk Mitigation, Compliance, and Oversight Monitoring

All grant and IAA applications undergo a rigorous review by RESTORE grant and program staff for compliance with two CFR 200, environmental laws, other statutory requirements, and best available science. All issues identified are collaboratively resolved with the applicant using a team approach. In FY 2023, a total of 23 awards and 41 award amendments were processed (32 non-monetary and 9 monetary).

The Council compliance/oversight program is built upon understanding and assessing risk. The annual compliance/oversight plan was developed and successfully implemented by Council staff. Almost 200 financial reports were reviewed in FY 2023. A 100% review of Florida Gulf Consortium payments was completed, comprising over 20 reviews of payment documentation with each of these completed within 30 days of submission. On-site financial compliance reviews were conducted with the Florida Gulf Consortium and Louisiana. In addition, desk reviews of payment documentation were conducted for four grants and three IAAs.

To mitigate risk and improve the efficient application of limited monitoring resources, the Council staff developed and implemented the Grants Monitoring Risk Analysis and Screening Tool in FY 2020 to evaluate the potential need for additional oversight for each Council award. This tool articulates a number of risk factors that could affect the Council's assistance awards and assigns weights to these risk factors based on likelihood and impact. The tool pulls in available data from the Council's grant system for each award and collects the assessment of Council grant specialists. The tool provides an overall weighted risk score for each award that facilitates targeted selection of awards for advanced monitoring.

Award oversight and monitoring must be responsive to evolving program needs, manageable in scope, cognizant of risk factors and strategic in order to be successful and efficient while being in sync with changing project schedules. These oversight interactions serve as collaborative opportunities for staff to provide technical assistance to Council members during implementation and for members to share challenges, lessons learned and their successes along the way as they are encountered during both restoration planning and implementation.

One of the risks speaks to the potential for overlapping project funding for the same purpose, which could take the form of project duplication within the Council-Selected Restoration Component, or a project funded by either the Spill Impact Component, or by one of the other *Deepwater Horizon* funding streams, including NRDA or the NFWF GEBF. The Council is providing a portion of the financial support for the [DWH Project Tracker](#) which provides a comprehensive way to track restoration efforts from a variety of DWH funding sources. Council staff also facilitate a DWH Project Tracker Working Group that aims to increase consistency in the activity data submitted to the DWH Project Tracker by the Council's funding partner.

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 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 as it makes coastal restoration funding decisions. Specifically, proposals for Council funding should discuss whether the project or program is vulnerable to climate risks such as sea level rise, changes in rainfall patterns, and/or potential increases in hurricane intensity. In particular, proposals should discuss how such risks might affect the benefits and duration of the project or program. Where applicable, proposals should also discuss how the project or program might mitigate future risks associated with sea level rise,

subsidence, and/or storms. This guidance, titled “[Council-Selected Restoration Component FPL 3 Proposal Submission Guidelines and Review Process](#),” is available on the Council’s website, and is being updated in FY 2024 for the next FPL. The Council will continue to carefully consider how changing environmental conditions could influence the effectiveness, sustainability, and resilience of future restoration investments.

6.3 Enterprise Risk Management

Audits of the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council

Three Treasury Office of Inspector General (TOIG) audits were completed during FY 2023 with no findings related to financial management in accordance with accounting principles; no deficiencies in internal control over financial reporting considered material weaknesses; and no instances of reportable noncompliance with laws, regulations, contracts, and grant agreements tested. Similarly, the Council’s information security program and practices were found to be effective, and there were no findings under the Payment Integrity Information Act audit. The IPERA Review found that the Council was compliant with all of the applicable requirements set forth in PART IV-A.3 of Appendix C to OMB Circular No. A-123, Requirements for Payment Integrity Improvement (OMB M-18-20) and the Charge Card Assessment found that the overall risk of illegal, improper, or erroneous purchases and payments in the Council’s charge card program was low and in the convenience check program was also very low.

The following is a summary of TOIG audits closed during FY 2023 along with a brief summary of findings:

Closed TOIG Audits during FY 2023:

- Management and Performance Challenges for FY 2023 (OIG-CA-23-001) was completed October 12, 2022, noting two challenges: Federal Statutory and Regulatory Compliance; and Grant and Interagency Agreement Monitoring.
- Information Technology: The Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council Federal Information Security Modernization Act of 2014 Evaluation Report for Fiscal Year 2023 was completed on July 27, 2023 (OIG-CA-23-036) and found the Council’s information security program and practices were effective.
- Payment Integrity Information Act (PIIA) Audit (OIG-23-025) was completed on May 18, 2023, with one finding. The Council’s risk assessment information reported on [PaymentAccuracy.gov](#) was not consistent with the supporting documentation. The will review OMB’s Annual Data Calls prior to live publication to ensure the accuracy of the data reported. Further, the Council will use this audit report to improve our reporting and compliance with PIAA and continue to work diligently to comply with the requirements of the law, to adhere to OMB’s guidance, and to prevent, reduce, and recover improper payments in the Council’s programs.
- Financial Statement Audit (OIG-CA-23-008) was completed November 16, 2022, and found the financial statements were fairly presented, in all material respects, in accordance with accounting principles generally accepted in the United States of America. Further, no deficiencies in internal control over financial reporting that are considered material weaknesses; and no instances of reportable noncompliance with laws, regulations, contracts, and grant agreements tested.

In addition to the TOIG audits, the Council is also subject to audit and/or testing reviews

from other agencies which include the following:

- RC Annual Purchase Card Audit was completed on February 1, 2023. As a result of the audit, The Director of Administration will work with the Purchase Card holder to develop an 889 Source of Supply Compliance checklist. This checklist will be inserted into the GCERC Credit Card Management Plan. This checklist will be developed using the Bureau of Fiscal Service Memo of December 21, 2020 Subject " Cardholders use of Sam.gov to check reps and Certs prior to purchase" This memo from ARC has the steps for vetting vendors as authorized sources of supply.

Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) Internal Controls

The Council's unwavering commitment to upholding financial integrity and effective internal control is evident in its diligent efforts to establish and maintain robust systems. By continuously improving its financial and grants management controls and documentation, the Council ensures the highest standards of financial management and accountability. These measures, combined with the Council's dedication to continuous improvement, position it as a leader in the field of financial integrity and effective internal control.

The Council complies with the requirements of OMB Circular A-123 Management's Responsibility for Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) and Internal Controls, as well as Improper Payments and Elimination and Recovery Act (IPERA), the Uniform Guidance (2 CFR Part 200 - Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards), the President's Management Agenda, etc., as well as internally generated ERM requirements. The Council has established an ERM governance structure that begins with specific oversight responsibility assigned to the Audit Committee. The Executive Director is delegated responsibility for implementation and oversight of the ERM program and in turn, has assigned program development and execution responsibilities to the CFO/Director of Administration. The Executive Director has designated the Director of Administration as the agency Chief Risk Officer who is supported directly by a risk management specialist. Risk management and internal controls are managed by staff within finance, budget, and IT; compliance, and internal controls are integrated into all elements of the organization.

In the FY 2023 Risk Profile update, the main focus for Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) was the top seven critical risks. Each risk was reviewed and it was determined that effective controls were in place. The Council continues to closely monitor the top seven risks and implement mitigation activities with the continued refinement and development of the Council Post-Award Grant/IAA Monitoring process and continued internal controls testing. The Council's "17 Principles of Internal Control Checklist" was updated in FY21. This annual checklist update is critical to demonstrate how the Council meets the requirements outlined in the Government Accountability Office (GAO) Green Book and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular A123.

6.4 Other Administrative Updates

Federal Information Security Modernization Act (FISMA)

In fiscal year 2023, the Council maintained a comprehensive Federal Information Security Modernization Act (FISMA) program for its information systems. This program adheres to the Risk Management Framework, which incorporates the security controls and requirements defined by the National Institute

of Standards and Technology (NIST). Through periodic audits, the Council has effectively managed organizational risk and upheld a robust information security program. The Council is proud to provide an unqualified assurance regarding the objectives of Section 2 and Section 4 of FMFIA for fiscal year 2023. With its established and effective internal control over financial reporting, the Council is assured that internal controls are operating seamlessly. The Council had a successful outcome of the sixth evaluation of its information security program and practices under the *Federal Information Security Modernization Act of 2014* (FISMA).^{2,3} Under the latest evaluation, the Council responded to the FY 2023 core and supplemental metrics from the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) *FY 2023-2024 Inspector General (IG) FISMA Reporting Metrics*, Version 1.1, dated February 10, 2023.⁴ The Council takes great pride in implementing internal controls over the effectiveness and efficiency of operations, reliable financial reporting, and compliance with applicable laws and regulations to ensure operational effectiveness are operating effectively at the highest federal standards.

Freedom of Information Act Requests (FOIA)

During FY 2023, Council staff received 12 Freedom of Information Requests (FOIA). The average number of days needed to respond to these requests was one day. No funds were collected from the requesters.

7. Centers of Excellence Accomplishments

Background

The RESTORE Act dedicates 2.5 percent of the Trust Fund to the Centers of Excellence Research Grants Program, administered by the Department of Treasury. These funds may be used to establish Centers of Excellence and by those Centers of Excellence, for science, technology, and monitoring in one or more of the following disciplines:

- Coastal and deltaic sustainability, restoration, and protection, including solutions and technology that allow citizens to live in a safe and sustainable manner in a coastal delta in the Gulf Coast region;
- Coastal fisheries and wildlife ecosystem research and monitoring in the Gulf Coast region;
- Offshore energy development, including research and technology to improve the sustainable and safe development of energy resources in the Gulf of Mexico;
- Sustainable and resilient growth, economic and commercial development in the Gulf Coast region; and
- Comprehensive observation, monitoring, and mapping of the Gulf of Mexico.

The RESTORE Act specifies who may apply to receive funds under the Centers of Excellence Research Grants Program. The following are the Centers of Excellence Research Grants Program eligible applicants for each state:

² Public Law 113-283 (December 18, 2014).

³ OIG, *The Gulf Cost Ecosystem Restoration Council Federal Information Security Modernization Act of 2014 Evaluation Report for Fiscal Year 2023*, (OIG-CA-23-036; July 27, 2023).

⁴ OMB, Department of Homeland Security, and the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency developed the IG FISMA Reporting Metrics in consultation with the Federal Chief Information Officers Council.

- In Alabama, the Alabama Gulf Coast Recovery Council or such administrative agent as it may designate;
- In Florida, the Florida Institute of Oceanography;
- In Louisiana, the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority Board of Louisiana through the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority of Louisiana;
- In Mississippi, the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality; and
- In Texas, the Office of the Governor or an appointee of the Office of the Governor.

Pursuant to the RESTORE Act, each Center of Excellence provides an annual report to the RESTORE Council with information regarding all grants, including the amount, discipline or disciplines, and recipients of the grants, and in the case of any grant awarded to a consortium, the membership of the consortium. This information is to be included in the Council’s Annual Report to Congress. As of the date of this report, five Centers of Excellence have been established. Following are summaries of the activities from each program; Full annual reports for FY 2023 from each [Center of Excellence](#) are provided on the Council’s website.

7.1 Alabama’s RESTORE Act Center of Excellence

Brief Description of the selected COE

In 2015 the Alabama Gulf Coast Recovery Council (AGCRC) selected the Alabama Marine Environmental Sciences Consortium (MESC) at the Dauphin Island Sea Lab (DISL) to be the home for Alabama’s Center of Excellence (ALCOE). The Alabama MESC is comprised of 23 public and private colleges and universities located throughout Alabama from the mountains to the coast: Alabama A&M University, Alabama State University, Athens State University, Auburn University, Auburn University at Montgomery, Birmingham-Southern College, Huntingdon College, Jacksonville State University, Judson College, Samford University, Spring Hill College, Stillman College, Talladega College, Troy University, Tuskegee University, The University of Alabama, University of Mobile, the University of Montevallo, the Universities of North Alabama, South Alabama, and West Alabama. The MESC was founded to focus resources and reduce redundancy in Marine Sciences in higher education while serving as a vehicle for collaborative coastal studies. Dauphin Island Sea Lab was founded in 1972, a former Air Force Base. Please see <https://www.disl.edu/about/our-history> for a history of DISL’s facilities, science, and personnel. The Dauphin Island Sea Lab’s mission is to become a center for transformative U.S. oceanic and coastal research and education.

Overview of focus of the COE

The ALCOE is focused on RESTORE Act Priority Disciplines 1,2,4, and 5, highlighted below.

- (1) Coastal and deltaic sustainability, restoration and protection, including solutions and technology that allow citizens to live in a safe and sustainable manner in a coastal delta in the Gulf Coast Region;
- (2) Coastal fisheries and wildlife ecosystem research and monitoring in the Gulf Coast Region;
- (4) Sustainable and resilient growth, economic and commercial development in the Gulf of Mexico;
- (5) Comprehensive observation, monitoring, and mapping of the Gulf of Mexico.

Summary of the annual performance of the COE

Of the 15 milestones outlined in the amended Alabama Center of Excellence Federal Award issued in September 2022, three (3) were completed in FY2023: Milestone 8: RFP1 Subcontract generation;

Milestone 9: Host one innovative Science Communications training workshop; and Milestone 10: Develop, advertise, and receive proposals related to RFP2.

7.2 Florida's RESTORE Act Centers of Excellence

The primary foci for the Florida RESTORE Act Centers of Excellence Program (FLRACEP) in 2023 were to conduct a strategic planning effort and award three new Centers of Excellence from a new Treasury grant. This year also marked the original end-dates for the request for proposals (RFP) III projects, but due to pandemic impacts, most of these will be completed under no-cost extensions in 2024.

Florida Institute of Oceanography (FIO) (grant administrators) and the Program Management Team established milestones towards a new strategic plan. The first milestone was to assess the results and impact of past Florida

Centers of Excellence. Each of the 21 projects, which includes completed, in-progress, and just awarded grants, wrote summaries that identified the major results, impact, and additional knowledge gaps for their projects. These are being assembled with relevant metrics in a "Results and Impacts of the First Decade of the Florida RESTORE Act Centers of Excellence Program," for publication in January 2024. This accounting and review of results is an important step towards identifying the areas of research and approaches for the next 5-10 years for the program. In addition, external consultant, CoastWise Partners, solicited feedback from individual Program Management Team members through a guided conversation, to learn more about their perspectives on FLRACEP and future directions. The summary includes twelve key findings that will be presented to the Program Management Team and FIO for further discussion in January 2024.

The Annual All Hands Meeting in January 2023 took place at the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Florida, with a virtual option for the broader community. Over a day and a half, the current and newly awarded Centers of Excellence leads and several students reporting on research progress. The meeting also included a discussion of research needs for Florida Bay, GRIIDC data management and archiving training, and shared meals for networking and discussions.

FIO submitted a budget amendment for their current grant in late 2022 and an application for a new award to cover RFP IV and future grant awards and administrative costs. In spring 2023, FLRACEP received a new Treasury award that includes the restoration science grants awarded to three research teams that include end users in all phases of the project. In addition, Treasury approved an amendment for the continuation of the long-term fisheries monitoring and technology development Center of Excellence, "Spawning Habitat and Early-life Linkages to Fisheries" (SHELF).

FIO continued financial and administrative support and oversight for FLRACEP. In addition, a Program Coordinator, Ms. Kristie Erickson, started working for FIO in early January 2023. She is assisting with FLRACEP, including work on a new website, which will be available in early 2024. Staff continued to monitor RFP II, III, and III.5 and drafted and executed the new sub-agreements for RFP IV.

The Office of Gulf Coast Restoration has obligated over \$10.83 M in research awards through five RFPs since the inception of the program. We look forward to sharing the decadal review publication in January and finalizing a strategic plan in early 2024.

7.3 Louisiana’s RESTORE Act Centers of Excellence

The second Request for Proposals cycle (RFP2 cycle) of the RESTORE Act Center of Excellence for Louisiana (LA-COE) involves managing four Graduate Studentship awards and four Research Awards. During FY 2023, LA-COE hosted a semi-annual webinar for research recipients, co-hosted a co-production workshop, hosted a LA-COE session at the State of the Coast Conference (SOC), and held an All-hands meeting and Executive Committee meeting. Research subrecipients also submitted their third and fourth performance progress reports (PPRs) in February and August, respectively. The details of those awards, results, reports, and any available data, as well as how this research can inform the Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority Coastal Master Plan is routinely updated on the LA-COE RFP2 cycle webpage: <https://thewaterinstitute.org/la-coe/funded-research-rfp2>.

7.4 Mississippi’s RESTORE Act Centers of Excellence

Brief Description of the selected COE

In February 2015, the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) made available for public comment for 45 days a draft Request for Proposals (RFP) describing the competitive selection process, rules, and policies. MDEQ prepared the draft RFP in accordance with state law and in compliance with 31 C.F.R. §34.700-708. Notice of the public comment and review period for the draft RFP was published in the Sun Herald and Clarion Ledger newspapers as well as online at www.restore.ms. After consideration of meaningful input from the public, a final RFP was published in April 2015. Notice of availability of the final RFP was published in the Sun Herald and Clarion Ledger newspapers on April 6, 2015, and April 13, 2015, as well as online at www.restore.ms. The deadline to submit proposals was May 7, 2015. As a result of the Final RFP, MDEQ received two proposals. After reviewing the proposals according to the qualifications and criteria described above, the Mississippi Based Restore Act Center of Excellence (MBRACE) was selected. MBRACE is a consortium of four Mississippi universities - Jackson State University, Mississippi State University, University of Mississippi, and University of Southern Mississippi. The University of Southern Mississippi serves as the lead university for the consortium.

Overview of focus of the COE

The focus of MBRACE, a consortium of Mississippi’s research universities, is a sound, comprehensive science- and technology-based understanding of the chronic and acute stressors, both anthropogenic and natural, on the dynamic and productive waters and ecosystems of the northern Gulf. The goals of MBRACE are: (1) serve as a focal point for new, long-term research and socioeconomic initiatives along the northern Gulf with relevance to Mississippi’s resources; (2) serve the people of Mississippi and the northern Gulf region with a scientifically based understanding of ecosystem status and trends (past to present, predictive) with special emphasis on improved forecasting abilities to ensure sustainable coastal and ocean ecosystems of the Gulf; and (3) work within a consortium of stakeholders including Mississippi’s research universities under the Mississippi Research Consortium, state and federal agencies, local communities, private industry, and non-governmental organizations.

Summary of the annual performance of the COE

MBRACE continued to move the Center of Excellence program forward. The five-person Executive Steering Committee (ESC) comprised of leadership from the four MBRACE universities continues to work with the administrative team to execute the program. MBRACE continued working on three key 2021-2023 All Hands Meeting Action Items: (1) Model Coordination; (2) Conceptual Model and Paper Development; and (3) Policy Brief. Follow-up work included coordinating and contributing to meetings

with PIs and ESC and communicating via e-mail and calls. Regular e-mails and communications with EAG, ESC, and PIs and Leads continued for these topics. Additionally, MBACE released a solicitation to onboard a Program Manager to carry out day-to-day activities of the Center and held interviews with applicants for the position. MBACE continued to develop research priorities and the next RFP and contract, including SOW, budget, and draft RFP. MBACE also performed closeout activities in accordance with closeout requirements in their subaward.

7.5 Texas' RESTORE Act Centers of Excellence

As the Texas Governor's appointee to the RESTORE Council, Toby Baker, Deputy Chief of Staff for the Office of the Governor (OGG) has established two Centers of Excellence in Texas in accordance with the requirements set forth in the RESTORE Act and U.S. Treasury regulations.

Texas OneGulf

The mission of the Texas OneGulf (OG) Center of Excellence is to gather and improve knowledge about the Gulf of Mexico to inform decision-making around the challenges to environmental and economic sustainability of the Gulf of Mexico and its impact on the health and well-being of Texans and the nation. Texas OneGulf is designed with the capacity and flexibility to address all five disciplines denoted in Section 1605 of RESTORE. For this reporting period, OG has begun activities for three projects. One project has recently been completed and two are on-going. OG currently has three additional research projects pending final approval by TCEQ. Those projects are expected to begin in January 2024.

Subsea Systems Institute

The Subsea Systems Institute (SSI) is a Center of Excellence formed under the Restore Act and represents a collaboration between the University of Houston, Rice University and NASA/Johnson Space Center. The mission of SSI is to improve the safety and efficiency of offshore energy development by conducting translational engineering and technology development for offshore energy production. The key outcomes from the work of the SSI are:

- Unbiased third-party validation to build public trust in the safety and operation of offshore energy production;
- Deployment of advantaged safest technologies for offshore energy development to ensure safety and operational excellence in offshore applications;

The attraction of talent for jobs and investment in the local, state, and national economy reinforce Houston and the state of Texas's reputation as the Energy Capital of the World.

Appendices

Appendix A – New Council-Selected Restoration Component Activities Funded During FY 2023

Project Title: Deer Island Beneficial Use Site Implementation

Council Member: State of Mississippi, Department of Environmental Protection

Award Amount: \$2,998,626 FPL 1

Federal Award ID Number: GT1CP23MS0002

Award Date: 4/11/2023

End Date: 4/6/2025

Project Description: The state of Mississippi, through Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), was awarded Council-Selected Restoration Component funding for implementation of the Deer Island Beneficial Use Site project. Funding will be utilized to create the containment berms for an approximately 70-acre beneficial use site located on the north side of Deer Island adjacent to Biloxi, Mississippi. Material mechanically excavated onsite near Deer Island and dredged during maintenance of the Black Warrior – Tombigbee (BWT) Federal navigation project in Alabama will be used beneficially to construct linear Chenier berms in the project area, providing approximately 5 acres of habitat. Construction of the containment features and development of a beneficial use monitoring and adaptive management plan will support future filling of the site with dredged material leveraged from local dredging projects to create approximately 70 acres of tidal wetlands over time.

Project Title: Marsh Restoration in Oyster Bay

Council Member: State of Alabama, Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

Award Amount: \$690,708 FPL 1

Federal Award ID Number: GT1CP23AL0003

Award Date: 6/22/2023

End Date: 6/30/2025

Project Description: The Marsh Restoration in Fish River, Weeks Bay, Oyster Bay & Meadows Tract (Implementation)-Oyster Bay project will address degraded habitat and hydrological conditions within the Oyster Bay watershed. This site contains approximately 150 acres of estuarine tidal and brackish marsh with a causeway constructed across the northern portion of the bay. The causeway is outfitted with undersized culverts that restrict north to south water flow. The restricted water flow has resulted in considerable impoundment of freshwater and a subsequent conversion of habitat on the north side of the causeway. The culverts have trapped significant amounts of sediment resulting in colonization in the area by giant reed (*Phragmites australis*). This project will restore and enhance resilience, sustainability, and natural defenses by reestablishing natural hydrology and connectivity between the north and south side of the causeway. Project activities will include replacement of culverts, removal of sediment and nuisance vegetation, road resurfacing, and planting of native species. The project will be implemented by the City of Gulf Shores along County Road 4 in Baldwin County (City of Gulf Shores), Alabama. The Oyster Bay site is located in the Mobile Bay watershed (HUC - 03160205).

Project Title: Marsh Restoration in Fish River and Weeks Bay

Council Member: Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Award Amount: \$1,553,089 FPL 1 Federal Award ID Number: IA1CP23CM0003

Award Date: 5/23/2023 End Date: 2/28/2025

Project Description: The Marsh Restoration in Fish River and Weeks Bay (Implementation) project will complete the 100% engineering and design phase, implement restoration activities, conduct monitoring to assess restoration outcomes, and engage in outreach and educational activities to restore approximately 50 acres of wetlands by back-filling dead-end canals with approximately 20,000 cubic yards of upland-sourced sediment to create both more natural tidal creeks and salt marsh habitat. These canals do not allow adequate water exchange between the tidally influenced portion of Fish River and cause stagnant water in the uppermost portion of the canals. This condition leads to a low dissolved oxygen level, which reduces the value of this habitat for many fish species. Further, the historic tidal flow of the wetland system is disrupted by the canals and adjacent spoil piles.

The restoration measures will improve tidal flushing within the canals and improve hydrological connectivity. The total project cost is \$1,679,089, which includes \$126,000 in leveraging from NOAA. Total Council funding requested is \$1,553,089. The expected project timeframe is two years. This project is part of the Connecting Coastal Waters (CCW) initiative NOAA is leading with partners to implement projects that restore the extent, functionality and resiliency of Gulf Coast wetlands. The project area is in Baldwin County, Alabama on Fish River at the Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR) property north of US Highway 98. Project partners include the Weeks Bay NERR and the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

Project Title: Enhancing Hydrologic Connectivity in Justin's Bay (Mobile Bay) (Planning)

Council Member: State of Alabama, Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

Award Amount: \$1,000,000 FPL 3b Federal Award ID Number: GT3CP23AL0007

Award Date: 3/6/2023 End Date: 3/31/2026

Project Description: The RESTORE Council has approved planning activities in Council-Selected Restoration Component funding for the Enhancing Hydrologic Connectivity in Justin's Bay (Mobile Bay) project, sponsored by Alabama, through the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. The project builds on a previous study of the Mobile Bay Causeway and hydrology conducted in 2015, and supports the primary RESTORE Comprehensive Plan goal to restore and conserve habitat through a planning effort that will: 1) address any data gaps remaining from the 2015 study, 2) evaluate the suggested restoration alternatives with a cost-logistics/feasibility frame of reference, and 3) move identified and prioritized restoration alternatives forward to a 30% preliminary engineering design.

The construction of the Mobile Bay Causeway in 1927 resulted in a significant amount of dredge material placement over large portions of the Upper Mobile Bay marsh complex. At the time, filling of marsh was a preferred alternative to elevating the causeway and as a result, restrictions of hydrological interaction and connections between Mobile Bay and its Delta, including faunal migrations and natural food web interactions have been curtailed. Project activities will inform the restoration of the

hydrological exchange necessary for coastal marsh and estuarine wetland habitats in the area to maintain ecological integrity and ecosystem health.

Project Title: Water Quality Improvement Program for Coastal Mississippi Waters

Council Member: State of Mississippi, Department of Environmental Protection

Award Amount: \$6,849,784 2021 FPL 3b

Federal Award ID Number: GT3CP23MS0008

Award Date: 9/7/2023

End Date: 9/7/2028

Project Description: Mississippi, through the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), is requesting Council-Selected Restoration Component funding for the proposed Water Quality Improvement Program for Coastal Mississippi Waters. This program will support the primary RESTORE Comprehensive Plan goal to restore water quality and quantity in the Mississippi Gulf Coast Region through the identification and implementation of water quality improvement projects. Program activities include planning, engineering and design, septic-to-sewer conversion, implementation of new stormwater and wastewater systems, and repairing/upgrading existing stormwater and wastewater systems. This program will be coordinated with water quality improvement efforts under other funding streams to maximize outcomes.

Causes of water quality degradation in coastal systems include nutrient pollution and associated hypoxia and also bacteriological sources. Water quality degradation is often attributed to urban runoff, discharge, and overflow issues associated with aging or insufficient wastewater management. The conversion of septic-to-sewer and implementation of stormwater and wastewater improvement practices under this program is anticipated to reduce non-point source pollutant loads to downstream coastal receiving water bodies, resulting in an improvement in water quality of coastal waters and benefits to living coastal marine resources.

Project Title: Gulf Coast Tribal Youth Conservation Program

Council Member: U.S. Department of the Interior

Award Amount: \$927,000 FPL 3b

Federal Award ID Number: IA3CP23CM0004

Award Date: 9/9/2022

End Date: 8/31/2026

Project Description: The RESTORE Council has approved in Council-Selected Restoration Component funding for the Tribal Youth Coastal Restoration Program. The sponsor is the U.S. Department of the Interior, on behalf of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). This includes planning and implementation funds as FPL Category 1. The program will support the primary RESTORE Comprehensive Plan goal to enhance community resilience through planning and implementation activities that will continue the restoration work begun under the Council’s 2015 Initial FPL of the following federally-recognized tribes: Chitimacha Tribe, Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, Poarch Band of Creek Indians, Seminole Tribe of Florida, and Miccosukee Indian Tribe, and will add the Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana. Tribes will create projects on their respectively Tribal lands in Gulf Coastal Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida as well as lands that drain into the Gulf to protect natural resources and the environment, and maintain a healthy ecosystem, while learning cultural values. These training projects should restore 1,000 acres of habitat on Tribal lands.

Project Title: Enhancing Gulf Waters Through Forested Watershed Restoration

Council Member: U.S. Department of the Agriculture, Forest Service

Award Amount: \$23,000,000 2021 FPL 3b

Federal Award ID Number: IA3CP23CM0005

Award Date: 9/1/2023

End Date: 8/31/2030

Project Description: The RESTORE Council has approved Council-Selected Restoration Component funding for the Enhancing Gulf Waters through Forested Watershed Restoration program, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This includes planning and implementation funds as FPL Category 1. The program will support the primary RESTORE Comprehensive Plan goal to restore water quality and quantity through activities to restore private and public forests by providing technical and financial assistance to private landowners and communities in watersheds where forest resources are instrumental to the health of the Gulf of Mexico. A coordinated cross-boundary effort will be led by state forestry agencies in Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi, leveraging the funding and activities of other organizations that are well established in the RESTORE zone. Activities include social marketing techniques to effectively reach landowners, implementation of best management practices, and use of science-based decision support tools to inform forest restoration investments and quantify outcomes.

A healthy Gulf stems from healthy estuaries, healthy estuaries depend on healthy watersheds, healthy watersheds flow from healthy forests, and healthy forests require engaged landowners. Anticipated environmental benefits from this program include improvements to water quality and quantity and wildlife and threatened and endangered species habitat through professional forest management, avoided land use conversion, and increased forest cover.

Appendix B – New SEP Activities Funded During FY 2023

Project Title: Public / Private Partnership (Accelerate MS)

Council Member: State of Mississippi, Department of Environmental Protection

Award Amount: \$2,199,550

Federal Award ID Number: GNSSP23MS0045

Award Date: 2/16/2023

End Date: 3/31/2025

Project Description: The State of Mississippi, through the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), is requesting spill impact component funding for the Public / Private Training Partnership (Accelerate MS) project.

The project, administered by MDEQ, will support workforce development and job creation in the Gulf Coast Region by enhancing coordination among workforce development partners in Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson Counties. Components of the program may be implemented by MDEQ and subrecipient, Accelerate MS. Accelerate MS is the State’s rebranded Mississippi Office of Workforce Development with the goal of creating more jobs and bringing economic development and growth to the State of Mississippi. The project is designed to launch a large-scale project for workforce development in the three coastal counties. Accelerate MS would provide an opportunity for a mix of public, private, and non-governmental organization (NGO) partners to identify labor market needs across targeted industry

sectors. This project will include three programs: Accelerate

Reentry Program (ARP), Accelerate Business Competitiveness (ABC) and Accelerate Career Coach (ACC). Additionally, Accelerate MS would disseminate information obtained from industry partners to assist a mix of K-12, Community College, Institutes of Higher Learning (IHL), and NGO organizations in developing workforce training programs for careers in high-paying industries. Other activities may also include, but are not limited to, planning, oversight and management, and coordination of sub-award(s) between MDEQ and sub-recipient.

Project Title: Gulf Coast Center of Security and Emerging Technology (CSET) Program

Council Member: State of Mississippi, Department of Environmental Protection

Award Amount: \$5,237,010

Federal Award ID Number: GNSSP23MS0051

Award Date: 7/7/2023

End Date: 12/31/2026

Project Description: The State of Mississippi, through the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), was awarded RESTORE Act Spill Impact Component funds for the Gulf Coast Center of Security and Emerging Technology (CSET) Program.

Under a subaward with MDEQ, Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MGCCC) will implement this activity. The program would support workforce training efforts in the Gulf Coast Region through the development of training programs in emerging technology industries such as Cybersecurity, Coding/Programming, Data Analytics, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Virtual Reality (VR)/Augmented Reality (AR), and Simulation/Game Design. MGCCC and the Gulf Coast Center for Security and Emerging Technology (CSET) Tech Fusion project would provide no cost requisite training to students in emerging technologies with the goal of meeting the increasing industry demands of the Gulf Coast region. These training programs would develop a trained Information Technology (IT) workforce as well as provide opportunities for businesses and industries to upskill incumbent workers. Programs included in this proposed high-tech IT industry include Computer Networking Technology, Computer Programming Technology, Cybersecurity, Coding Technology, Data Analytics Technology, IT Specialist Technology, Simulation and Game Design Technology, Live Entertainment Technology, and Geographic Information Systems/ Broadband Technology. This project would allow MGCCC to create an advanced workforce development program in Harrison, Jackson, Stone, and George Counties in Mississippi to enhance workforce growth and job creation.

Project Title: 10-3: Keaton Beach and Steinhatchee Boat Ramps By-Pass

Council Member: Gulf Consortium (Florida)

Award Amount: \$383,665

Federal Award ID Number: GNSSP23FL0046

Award Date: 2/22/2023

End Date: 12/31/2024

Project Description: The Gulf Consortium, with its sub-recipient Taylor County is requesting \$383,665 in funding for a Feasibility Study to determine if it is a viable option to construct by-passes at Keaton Beach Boat Ramp and Steinhatchee Boat Ramp. Both boating facilities currently have congested, often unsafe vehicular traffic conditions due to the high usage and limited roadway access. The Feasibility Study will provide the County critically needed information to address vehicular traffic congestion at the primary,

heavily used boating facilities at Keaton Beach and Steinhatchee. The Feasibility Study will include, but not be limited to: (1) environmental studies; (2) land acquisition requirements or needs; (3) cultural resource assessments; (4) permitting requirements; (5) regulatory and possible mitigation measures that may be required to protect the coastal habitat; (6) traffic studies: and, (7) and estimated design, engineering, and construction costs. Taylor County will procure a qualified firm through the competitive bid process to complete the Feasibility Study. It is anticipated the project from grant award execution to completion will take 16 months to complete. The Feasibility Study is consistent with and addresses Comprehensive Plan Goal 5: Restore and Revitalize the Gulf Economy (primary), and addresses Objective 8: Restore, Diversify, and Revitalize the Gulf Economy with Economic and Environmental Restoration Projects (Florida-specific objective). The project duration is expected to be nearly two years. Future Implementation efforts will be undertaken after feasibility is determined.

Project Title: 13-3: Artificial Reef Program – Implementation

Council Member: Gulf Consortium (Florida)

Award Amount: \$1,246,249

Federal Award ID Number: GNSSP23FL0047

Award Date: 3/8/2023

End Date: 6/30/2025

Project Description: The Gulf Consortium, with its sub-recipient Citrus County is implementing Florida State Expenditure Plan project 13-3 Artificial Reef Program - Implementation. The program will include improving Citrus County’s only permitted reef, Fish Haven #1, center coordinates located at 28 47.4N 83 03.5W. A contractor will be hired to barge and deploy additional reef material consisting of processed concrete construction debris within the already permitted artificial reef boundary. Due to the amount of material to be deployed, the County estimates that deployment alone will take about a month to complete. The County believes this will provide greater recreational and economic opportunities for residents and tourists as well as reduce fishing and diving pressure on natural reefs. Increased artificial reef acreage will allow for recreational fishing opportunities and increased snorkeling, scuba and marine life viewing areas. These objectives are consistent with those of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission’s (FWC’s) artificial reef program. Additionally, this project addresses RESTORE Act eligible activity 10: Promotion of tourism in the Gulf Coast region, including recreational fishing, as well as Comprehensive Goal 5: Restore and Revitalize the Gulf Economy, and Comprehensive Plan Objective 8: Restore, Diversify, and Revitalize the Gulf Economy with Economic and Environmental Restoration Projects.

Project Title: 10-1: Spring Warrior – Acquisition

Council Member: Gulf Consortium (Florida)

Award Amount: \$621,686

Federal Award ID Number: GNSSP23FL0049

Award Date: 5/25/2023

End Date: 9/30/2024

Project Description: The Gulf Consortium, through the sub-recipient, Taylor County is requesting Oil Spill Impact component funding to acquire a 3.95-acre parcel known as Spring Warrior. The site is located on a short navigable channel providing direct access to the Gulf of Mexico. Though the County has a 51-mile coastline, there is currently limited public access to the Gulf. It is critical the County acquires additional public access locations on the Gulf for tourism and economic development. The Spring Warrior site has sufficient uplands for parking facilities for trucks and trailers as well as the development

of boater and park amenities such as restrooms. In addition to recreational fishing and motorized boating, the site could potentially accommodate a canoe and kayak launch as the Florida Circumnavigational Trail and the Big Bend Saltwater Paddling Trail are located within the adjacent coastal waters. The site has direct connection to the Spring Creek Unit of the Wildlife Management District, offering additional outdoor recreational and tourism development opportunities. The acquisition of the Spring Warrior parcel is consistent with and addresses the Restore Act eligible activities: Eligible Activity 10: Promotion of Tourism in the Gulf Coast Region, including recreational Fishing (primary); Comprehensive Plan Goal 5: Restore and Revitalize the Gulf Economy. A future application will be submitted to the Council for the engineering and design, permitting, and construction of an onsite recreational boat ramp and other associated amenities.

Project Title: 16-3: Land Acquisition for Floodplain Restoration and Resiliency

Council Member: Gulf Consortium (Florida)

Award Amount: \$3,374,518

Federal Award ID Number: GNSSP23FL0048

Award Date: 5/25/2023

End Date: 3/31/2026

Project Description: The Gulf Consortium, with subrecipient Pinellas County, is requesting funds to acquire properties in flood-zone areas to be maintained in perpetuity for conservation and floodplain storage to support coastal resiliency and environmental sustainability through the Land Acquisition for Floodplain Restoration and Resiliency project located within Pinellas County, Florida. Removing existing residential and commercial infrastructure or preventing additional infrastructure in flood-prone areas will 1) improve coastal resiliency, 2) provide increased coastal floodplain storage, 3) increase wildlife habitat, and 4) improve water quality. Oil Spill Impact Component RESTORE funds are requested solely for property acquisition and activities necessary for due diligence (i.e., appraisals, surveys, environmental site assessments). Pinellas County has developed a priority matrix which scores and ranks coastal floodplain properties of interest. The County will pursue properties in the highest ranked categories initially, with flexibility to respond to the dynamic real estate market over the course of the award period. This project aligns with RESTORE Comprehensive Plan Goal 1-- Restore and Conserve Habitat, and Goal 2 – Restore Water Quality and Quantity.

Project Title: 6-1: St. Joseph Bay/Chipola River Sewer Improvement Program

Council Member: Gulf Consortium (Florida)

Award Amount: \$889,017

Federal Award ID Number: GNSSP23FL0050

Award Date: 6/26/2023

End Date: 5/1/2027

Project Description: The Gulf Consortium, in collaboration with subrecipient Gulf County, is requesting funding the RESTORE Spill Impact Component Funding for SEP project 6-1: St. Joseph Bay/Chipola River Sewer Improvement Program including system upgrades and improvements. The project consists of the acquisition an existing system of 23,908 ft of collection lines, 2 manholes, 1,650 feet force mains, and 3 lift stations, as well as construction funding for upgrades to the system. Gulf County will establish an interlocal agreement/sub-recipient agreement with the City of Port St. Joe specifically for this project. This program will improve water quality and reduce nutrient and bacterial loads by replacing failing sewer infrastructure directly adjacent to St. Joseph Bay, and by enabling the abandonment of septic

systems near public beaches and the portions of the Apalachicola River watershed. This project aligns with the primary RESTORE Act Eligible Activity 1: Restoration and protection of the natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches and coastal wetlands of the Gulf Coast region. Additionally, this program follows Comprehensive Plan Goal 2: Restore Water Quality and Quantity (primary), and it is consistent with Comprehensive Plan Objective 2: Restore, Improve, and Protect Water Resources (primary).

Project Title: 3-5: Veterans Park Living Shoreline Construction

Council Member: Gulf Consortium (Florida)

Award Amount: \$1,620,624

Federal Award ID Number: GNSSP23FL0052

Award Date: 8/21/2023

End Date: 2/28/2027

Project Description: The Gulf Consortium, in cooperation with its subrecipient Okaloosa County, is requesting Oil Spill Impact Component funding for SEP project 3-5, the Veterans Park Living Shoreline Project. The project includes 3 phases of construction with this award involving phase 1 construction of a 2,000-foot-long living shoreline at the Veterans Park site located on the southwest shore of Choctawhatchee Bay in Fort Walton Beach and monitoring to support all three phases of restoration construction. The objectives for the full project include: (1) shoreline stabilization to protect subtidal, intertidal and upland habitats, as well as public property; (2) restoration of seagrasses in the nearshore subtidal areas; (3) provision of benthic and intertidal hard substrate habitat for encrusting marine organisms (e.g., oysters); (4) provision of wildlife habitat for shorebirds and wading birds; and (5) improved aesthetics for park visitors. Permits have been obtained for this project from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and the United States Army Corps of Engineers. The project site is very unique and the proposed improvements will help to restore the natural shoreline, while protecting the upland coastal strand. The location will allow for increased public access, public involvement with plantings during construction and future educational opportunities for visitors, schools and non-profit/volunteer groups. This project will address RESTORE Comprehensive Plan Goal 1: Restore Conserve Habitat, and Objective 4: Restore and Enhance Natural Processes and Shorelines.

Project Title: FY22 RESTORE NBT-IB Magee Beach Park (BKT 3)

Council Member: State of Texas, Commission on Environmental Quality

Award Amount: \$250,000

Federal Award ID Number: GNSSP23TX0053

Award Date: 8/21/2023

End Date: 8/20/2025

Project Description: The State of Texas, through the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), was awarded RESTORE Act Spill Impact Component funds for the IB Magee Beach Park project, part of the Nature-Based Tourism (NBT) program. The NBT program supports the promotion of nature-based tourism in the Gulf Coast region in the areas where Hurricane Harvey struck in 2017. Under a subaward with TCEQ, Nueces County will manage the IB Magee Beach Park project. The project will provide nature-based tourism benefits to the local community while providing environmental and ecosystem education and recreation opportunities that will encourage action toward a healthier coast. The project purpose is to recover the loss of damaged primitive campsites and affiliated infrastructure in Nueces County, Texas. Restored campsites will provide access for low to moderate income families to experience nature-based tourism on the Texas coast. As nature-based tourism is one of the largest

economic drivers for Texas coastal communities, the rebuilding of tourism is imperative to improving the economy while benefiting the environment and ecological systems.