

Best Available Science Review Process: Funded Priority List 3 Revisions



RESTORE Act - Best Available Science Requirement

Best Available Science: RESTORE Act Definition

The RESTORE Act defines “Best Available Science” as science that “maximizes the quality, objectivity, and integrity of information, including statistical information; uses peer-reviewed and publicly available data; and clearly documents and communicates risks and uncertainties in the scientific basis for such projects.”

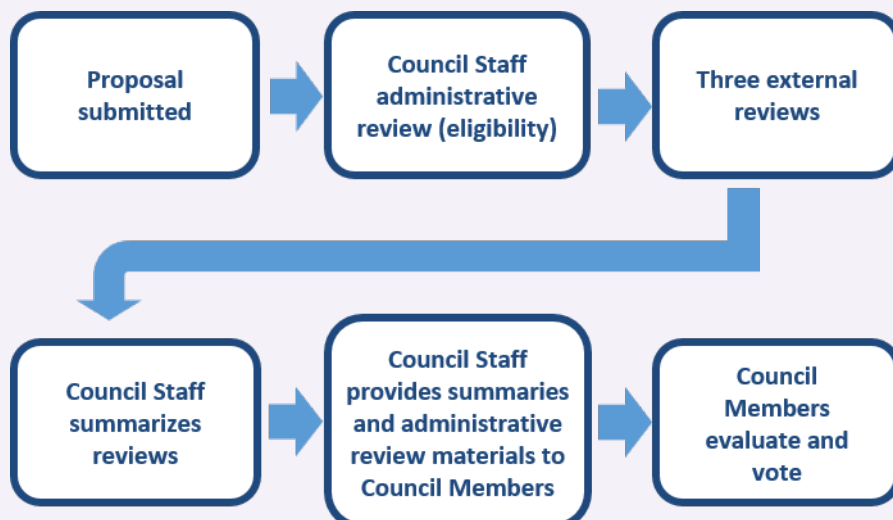
The RESTORE Act requires the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (Council) to “undertake projects and programs, using the best available science that would restore and protect the natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches, coastal wetlands, and economy of the Gulf Coast.”

To meet the intent of the RESTORE Act, the Council conducts Best Available Science (BAS) reviews of all project and program proposals submitted for funding. In the most recent update of its Comprehensive Plan, the Council made clear its intention to explore different approaches for improving its science review process for Council-Selected Restoration Component funded projects and programs.

Why A Revised Approach?

The Council’s 2015 [Initial Funded Priorities List](#) (FPL) utilized a voluntary, confidential science review process of mail-in reviews by at least three external expert scientists. This approach yielded scientifically sound projects and programs for approval, but also posed several challenges--especially when it came to resolving conflicting reviews.

Public comments on the Initial FPL and the 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update applauded the Council’s use of external science reviews, but also encouraged updating the process and utilizing a **Best Available Science (BAS) proposal review panel**.



Initial FPL BAS Review Approach

Identifying Synergies Through Collaboration

The 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update emphasized the importance of coordination and collaboration in order to leverage resources and maximize the effectiveness of available restoration funding.

In addition to assessing the scientific merit of projects, a BAS Proposal Review Panel can assess all project interactions, synergies, benefits, and risks. A panel could also examine projects in different geographic areas and assess the pros and cons of groups of projects within watersheds or ecoregion.

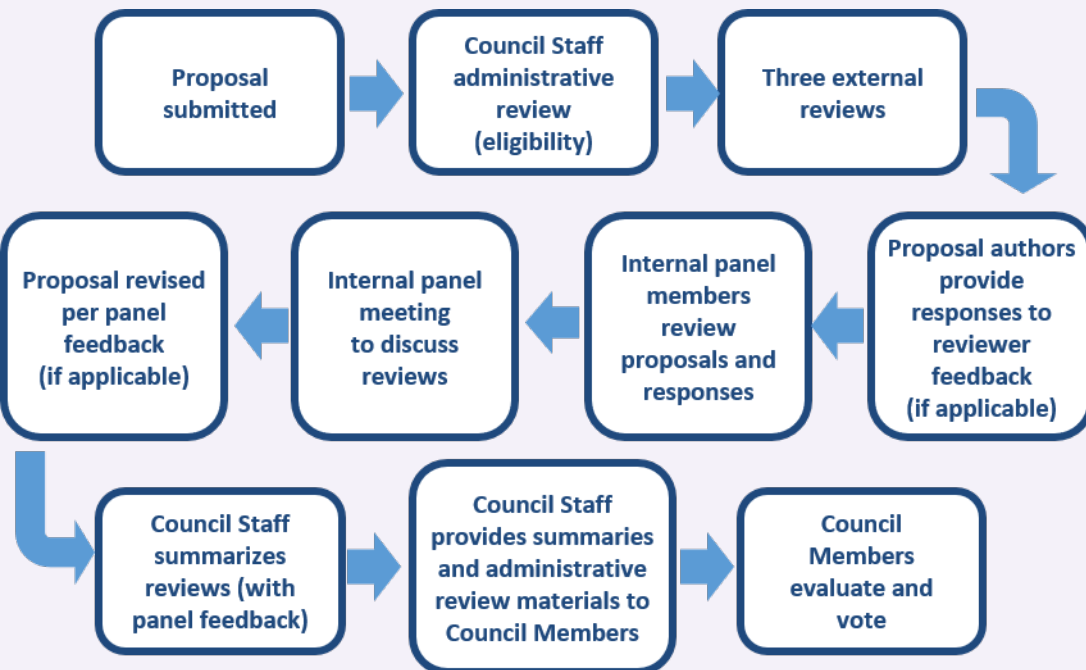


Revised Best Available Science Review Approach: External Mail-In Reviews with Internal Review Panel

In 2019, to enhance the Best Available Science Review process for the third Funded Priorities List (FPL 3a and 3b), Council staff and technical advisors have developed a revised approach to address challenges identified in the initial FPL.

This approach will continue to require external technical experts to complete mail-in BAS reviews for each submission. Once the external reviews are complete, an internal BAS Proposal Review Panel will reassess all proposals as well as the accompanying external mail-in reviews and proposal-writer responses to the external reviews.

Proposal writers will also have the opportunity to respond to both external reviews and BAS Proposal Review Panel feedback. Importantly, this approach ensures Council members maintain flexibility and discretion in the final decisions.



FPL 3 Best Available Science Review Approach

Who will make up the BAS Proposal Review Panel?

The BAS Proposal Review Panel will be composed of Council member agency technical staff, and will be facilitated by Council staff.

The intent of this panel is to tap into Council member-agency expertise to address external BAS review concerns and identify synergies between projects.

Instead of a few Council staff reconciling reviews alone, this diverse group of experts will engage in collaborative problem-solving to strengthen all submitted proposals.



Anticipated Benefits

Responsive to both public comments and comprehensive plan commitments, this revised approach offers several improvements to the initial Best Available Science Review process. The internal review panel will support council staff reconciliation of conflicting reviews. The establishment of the panel also offers the potential for continuity across panel members if they participate over multiple FPL cycles.

In the Initial FPL review process, external-only reviews were conducted independently, making it difficult to assess synergies between projects. The internal science review panel's collaborative review of all proposals offers increased opportunity to identify project interactions, synergies, benefits, and risks. This will assist the Council in selecting suites of projects that will maximize benefits and support a holistic approach to Gulf restoration.

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