

RESTORE Council Activity Description

General Information

Sponsor: U.S. Department of Agriculture

Title:

Gulf Coast Conservation Reserve Program

Project Abstract:

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), is requesting \$3.1M in Council-Selected Restoration Component funding for the proposed Gulf Coast Conservation Reserve Program (GCCRP). This request includes planning and implementation funds as FPL Category 1. The GCCRP was established through the Council's 2015 Initial Funded Priorities List. USDA is currently implementing the program in Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida for the purpose of protecting and restoring critical wildlife habitat and improving water quality through the development of wildlife habitat, conservation, and forest management plans. The GCCRP proposal for FPL 3b will build upon the restoration and conservation progress made through the initial program funding, and would support the primary RESTORE Comprehensive Plan goal to restore water quality and quantity through the implementation of conservation practices and restoration activities to address the priority resource concerns identified in the planning phase.

The health of the Gulf of Mexico depends upon the health of its estuaries, and the health of those estuaries is influenced by what happens upstream along tributary rivers including the Mississippi. GCCRP activities will allow for conservation planning on private lands including, but not limited to, ecosystem restoration by conducting soil and water conservation for the benefit of water quality to priority bays and estuaries. Program duration is 4 years.

FPL Category: Cat1: Planning/ Cat1: Implementation

Activity Type: Program

Program: Gulf Coast Conservation Reserve Program

Co-sponsoring Agency(ies): N/A

Is this a construction project?:

Yes

RESTORE Act Priority Criteria:

(I) 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.

(III) Projects contained in existing Gulf Coast State comprehensive plans for the restoration and protection of natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches, and coastal wetlands of the Gulf Coast region.

Priority Criteria Justification:

Projected to make the greatest contribution to restoring and protecting natural resources: The future health of the region's ecosystem will be decided on private lands. The five states on the Gulf

of Mexico encompass more than 290 million acres. Private agricultural and forest lands account for 86 percent of those acres. Consequently, the management of private lands has a tremendous influence on the health of the region's industries and natural resources, including the quantity and quality of water flowing into the gulf's estuaries, fisheries and other wildlife. Through an incentive-based, voluntary approach, USDA partners with farmers, ranchers, and landowners on private lands to sustain and enhance natural resources across the region.

This program will serve to assist willing private landowners with implementing conservation measures that improve water and wildlife habitat conditions. The project will result in incremental improvements to water quality with comprehensive conservation measures being implemented in the watershed. The conservation implementation will be conducted with the landowner's conservation goals in mind, enabling greater ownership in conservation and management activities that affect water quality and wildlife habitat conditions within the Gulf Coast Region. Outcomes will include direct improvements in water quality, wetland and upland wildlife habitat, and forest health.

"ACT" principles to "Avoid, Control, and Trap" nutrients and sediments will be used. 1) avoiding excess nutrient loss; 2) utilizing conservation practices that control runoff losses in-field; and 3) trapping nutrient and sediment losses that cannot be avoided or controlled.

Contained in Existing Gulf Coast State Comprehensive Plans: GCCRP was established through the RESTORE Council's Initial FPL in December 2015. USDA is currently implementing the program in Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida.

Project Duration (in years): 4

Goals

Primary Comprehensive Plan Goal:

Restore Water Quality and Quantity

Primary Comprehensive Plan Objective:

Restore, Improve, and Protect Water Resources

Secondary Comprehensive Plan Objectives:

Restore , Enhance, and Protect Habitats

Secondary Comprehensive Plan Goals:

Restore and Conserve Habitat

PF Restoration Technique(s):

Reduce excess nutrients and other pollutants to watersheds: Agriculture and forest management

Reduce excess nutrients and other pollutants to watersheds: Stormwater management

Location

Location:

This program will be implemented on private lands in coastal watersheds in AL, FL, and MS.

HUC8 Watershed(s):

South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Choctawhatchee-Escambia) - Florida Panhandle Coastal(Perdido Bay)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Choctawhatchee-Escambia) - Escambia(Lower Conecuh)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Alabama) - Alabama(Lower Alabama)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Mobile-Tombigbee) - Mobile Bay-Tombigbee(Mobile-Tensaw)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Mobile-Tombigbee) - Mobile Bay-Tombigbee(Mobile Bay)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Choctawhatchee-Escambia) - Florida Panhandle Coastal(Perdido)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Choctawhatchee-Escambia) - Florida Panhandle Coastal(Pensacola Bay)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Choctawhatchee-Escambia) - Florida Panhandle Coastal(Yellow)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Choctawhatchee-Escambia) - Florida Panhandle Coastal(Blackwater)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Choctawhatchee-Escambia) - Escambia(Escambia)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Pascagoula) - Pascagoula(Pascagoula)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Pascagoula) - Pascagoula(Black)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Pascagoula) - Pascagoula(Escatawpa)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Pascagoula) - Pascagoula(Mississippi Coastal)
South Atlantic-Gulf Region(Pearl) - Pearl(Lower Pearl)

State(s):

Alabama
Mississippi
Florida

County/Parish(es):

AL - Baldwin
AL - Escambia
AL - Mobile
FL - Escambia
FL - Santa Rosa
MS - Hancock
MS - Harrison
MS - George
MS - Jackson
MS - Pearl River
MS - Stone

Congressional District(s):

AL - 1
MS - 4
FL - 1

Narratives

Introduction and Overview:

The quality and, to a large extent, the quantity of fresh water entering the Gulf is affected by how those land uses are managed and whether they are converted to more intensive urban purposes. Thus, land protection and conservation aimed at private landowners is a priority for securing Gulf-wide ecosystem integrity. This action establishes the USDA's Gulf Coast Conservation Reserve Program as a Gulf-wide conservation program that targets priority conservation in both pristine and degraded habitats and in both agricultural and forestry lands. The GCCRP was established Initial Funded Priorities List (FPL) which was approved on December 2015. USDA is implementing the program in Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida for the purposes of protecting and restoring critical wildlife and improving water quality through the development of wildlife habitat, conservation, and forest management plans

(https://www.restorethegulf.gov/sites/default/files/FPL_FS_K4_GW%20Conservation%20Reserve%20Program%20v11.15.15.pdf).

The distribution of agricultural land is important to wildlife conservation because farming is a major land use in many areas where federal land ownership is limited. Among USDA farm production regions, the federal government owns less than seven percent of all land in the Northeast, Southeast, Delta States, Corn Belt, Lake States, Northern Plains, Southern Plains, and Appalachia. Programs to protect wildlife species and their habitats in these areas will often need to include privately owned lands. Similarly, within the contiguous 48 states, the farm sector owns much, if not most, of the 82 million acres of rural nonfederal wetlands; cropland and pasture also account for 57 percent of the 101 million acres of converted wetlands.¹⁰ Hence, farm sector participation is key to any national effort to protect and restore wetlands and their dependent species
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1673&context=nrj>).

The intent of the program is to allow for conservation planning on private lands including, but not limited to, ecosystem restoration by conducting soil and water conservation for the benefit of water quality to priority bays and estuaries. The health of the Gulf of Mexico depends upon the health of its estuaries, and the health of those estuaries is influenced by what happens upstream along tributary rivers including the Mississippi. USDA staff will engage state and local conservation partners in planning efforts to identify tracts of lands within the Gulf Coast Region that could benefit from conservation measures that would address natural resources and wildlife habitat degradation. These tracts of lands will be prioritized by watersheds (or sub-watersheds) that provide the most conservation benefit for the dollar invested. Conservation, forest management, and wildlife habitat plans will be developed to address the private landowners' conservation goals. The plans will document the natural resource concerns and conservation practices that would address the resource concerns. The plans will be developed with a regional perspective that fully considers the restoration and conservation needs of the Gulf Coast. Conservation practices that address water quality, wildlife habitat restoration and protection, and farmland preservation will be considered during the planning process. Conservation practices that address water quality, wildlife habitat restoration and protection, and farmland preservation would be implemented according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) practice standards. The agency's existing conservation delivery system would be used to expedite the implementation efforts. This would involve coordination across all partner agencies, including other federal and state environmental agencies, local conservation districts, and nonprofit organizations with interest in natural resource conservation.

Proposed Methods :

Nutrient pollution adversely impacts water quality and poses a significant threat to localized watersheds across the entire Gulf Coast. Excessive nutrient enrichment, or eutrophication, of Gulf Coast estuaries and their watersheds is a chronic threat that can lead to hypoxia, harmful algal blooms, habitat losses, and fish kills. There are many existing local, state, regional, and federal programs across the Gulf that are working to address nutrient pollution, including the eight National Estuary Programs across the Gulf Coast, the Gulf of Mexico Alliance, EPA's Gulf of Mexico program, USDA's Gulf of Mexico Initiative, and the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council. Building on these existing efforts, nutrient reductions can enhance overall ecosystem health by benefitting the estuaries that are integral habitat providing food, shelter, and nursery grounds for many of the Gulf's ecologically and economically important species (e.g., fish). The DWH incident resulted in impacts to ecological connectivity throughout nearshore habitats (see text box below that summarizes key aspects of the injury assessment that informed restoration planning). To restore these ecological linkages, the integrated restoration portfolio needs to include a portfolio of water quality and habitat restoration approaches that can provide large-scale benefits and address chronic threats to the Gulf ecosystem. Reducing nutrient loading is part of the portfolio that will mitigate the chronic and pervasive ecosystem threats incurred by eutrophic Gulf Coast waters (https://www.gulfspillrestoration.noaa.gov/sites/default/files/wp-content/uploads/Chapter-5_Restoring-Natural-Resources_508.pdf).

About 20 elemental nutrients are essential for plant growth. Some of these nutrients are supplied naturally by the air, water, and soil. Fertilizers and manures are used to supplement the natural supplies for optimum crop growth. When nutrients are used correctly they are very beneficial, but when they are used in the wrong place at the wrong time they become pollutants. Both groundwater and surface water are very vulnerable to pollution. Water is one of our most valuable resources, and protecting it is an important concern.

The first line of defense to control nitrogen and phosphorus is the use of nutrient management. Managing nutrients is referred to as the 4Rs: Right rate, Right timing, Right source, and Right placement. Consistent use of the 4Rs will help prevent excess nutrient loss from agricultural fields into surface and ground water resources.

All nutrients can be lost when soil is eroded, but phosphorus is especially vulnerable. The primary way to prevent phosphorus loss is to control erosion. If no sediments leave the land, sediment-attached phosphorus does not leave, although soluble phosphorus may be lost (<https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/best-management-practices-for-agricultural-nutrients>).

As nutrient costs continue to rise, producers are paying closer attention to the cost of nutrient application and return. Good nutrient management practices for growing a profitable crop are very similar to those needed for improving waterbird habitat. Nutrient management that ensures good water quality will benefit waterbirds.

Integrated pest management (IPM) involves using the best management practice that benefits both the cropping system and wildlife habitat. In many cases, IPM uses multiple methods of control that are based on economic and pest thresholds. Prudent use of agrichemicals will benefit the economics of production and waterbirds.

Waterbirds and other wildlife can be found in areas surrounding fields. Field edges are critical habitat for many species. Some simple management can be used to enhance these environments.

A conservation buffer is a type of field edge where small areas or strips of land are left in permanent vegetation. Buffers are designed to intercept pollutants and manage other environmental concerns.

Strategically placed buffer strips can effectively mitigate the movement of sediment, nutrients and pesticides within farm fields. These same buffers provide food and cover for waterbirds and wildlife. Types of buffers are riparian buffers, filter strips, grassed waterways, shelterbelts, windbreaks, contour grass strips, shallow water areas for wildlife, field borders, alley cropping and vegetative barriers (<https://www.uaex.edu/publications/pdf/FSA-9098.pdf>).

The project activities will identify natural resource concerns on private property throughout the Gulf Coast Region. Water quality and wildlife habitat resource concerns will be prioritized on individual land units and conservation plans will be developed to address those resource concerns. Conservation planning and environmental due diligence efforts will be completed during initial phase of the program. The menu of conservations practices and a list of exemplar conservation practices available for implementation through the GCCRP are attached. Management practices such as nutrient management has been documented to have positive impact on the environment as outlined in the study: Long-term agro-economic and environmental assessment of adaptive nutrient management on cropland fields with established structural conservation practices. The study concluded that the results from this long-term evaluation of the agronomic, environmental, and economic impacts indicated that N application was reduced when rate recommendations were based on soil test recommendations and historical yield data compared to traditional rate recommendations. More importantly, although N rate was correlated with revenue, it was not correlated to profit, challenging the traditional view that more fertilizer increases profit up to a point (<https://www.jswnonline.org/content/75/3/416>).

Conservation practices and restoration activities will be implemented to address water quality and wildlife habitat concerns on approximately 5,000 acres. The land will be subject to the NRCS conservation practice standards outlined in the conservation, forest management, and wildlife habitat plans developed in the planning phase of this program.

After the planning, engineering and compliance, USDA will enter into contracts with landowners to implement conservation practices on their property. Contracts will serve as an agreement to implement the conservation practices outlined in the conservation plan according to conservation practice standards and specifications (including any required property access agreement and activities related to project monitoring). It is typical for the landowner to implement the practices; however, if the landowner is not capable of carrying out the work, USDA could implement conservation practices through a federal contract or agreement with a third party.

Implementation of conservation practices includes implementation of construction or structural conservation practices (e.g., earth moving) and non-construction activities such as non-structural practices (e.g., vegetation management). All practices will be implemented according to the conservation practices standards and specifications.

Environmental Benefits:

This program will serve to assist willing private landowners with implementing conservation measures that improve water and wildlife habitat conditions. The project will result in incremental improvements to water quality with comprehensive conservation measures being implemented in the watershed. The conservation implementation will be conducted with the landowner's conservation goals in mind, enabling greater ownership in conservation and management activities that affect water quality and wildlife habitat conditions within the Gulf Coast Region. Outcomes will include direct improvements in water quality, wetland and upland wildlife habitat, and forest health.

We are becoming increasingly aware that almost everything we do may have some potential negative effect on the environment. Conservation practices or BMPs are designed to reduce the

negative effects of agricultural production on surface and ground water resources. In some especially sensitive areas, the acceptable level of production may be minimal, especially with respect to fertilization. In other places, fertilizers may be used along with BMPs. Fertilizers and other nutrient sources should never be applied haphazardly.

No single set of BMPs applies in all situations. The BMPs presented here are for nutrient management on a wide variety of agricultural lands across the state. The best set of practices for a specific cropping situation will depend on individual circumstances; however, it is always recommended to use a combination of BMPs to avoid, control, and trap nitrogen and phosphorus (<https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/best-management-practices-for-agricultural-nutrients>).

NRCS swiftly launched the Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative following the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill to enable farmers to create and enhance habitat for migratory birds, providing an alternative to habitat in impacted coastal ecosystems. NRCS invested \$40 million in the initiative, which led to conservation practices implemented on more than 470,000 acres in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri and Texas.

Mississippi State University completed a three-year evaluation of bird use of habitat and availability of food in rice fields, catfish ponds and wetlands managed through MBHI. The results were released in a report in fall 2014. This report includes findings that demonstrate the importance of landscape-level conservation efforts. The evaluation began in November 2010 (<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/initiatives/?cid=stelprdb1269772>).

Waterbirds occupy an important niche in streamside and wetland habitats. Their presence indicates a healthy ecosystem and can add value to agricultural lands. Agricultural producers with water resources on their land can fine-tune their management practices to enhance wildlife and waterbird populations. Water resources may include a river or stream bank, flooded field, reservoir, shallow water area or farm pond. Best management practices for agricultural production will improve water quality and reduce soil erosion as well as improve waterbird habitat (<https://www.uaex.edu/publications/pdf/FSA-9098.pdf>).

Metrics:

Metric Title: COI003 : Outreach/ Education/ Technical Assistance - # people enrolled - BMPs

Target: 30

Narrative: People (landowners) enrolled into the program to implement conservation practices on their land.

Metric Title: COI002 : Outreach/ Education/ Technical Assistance - # people reached

Target: 100

Narrative: People (landowners) that USDA will engage for the purpose of implementing this program.

Metric Title: HM005 : Agricultural BMPs - acres under contracts/agreements

Target: 5,000

Narrative: Acres under contract in which conservation practices will be planned and implemented.

Risk and Uncertainties:

This project relies on voluntary incentive-based conservation on private land. It is possible that

landowners who need to participate will not choose to participate. However, the RESTORE Act allows flexible incentives, providing a way to entice landowners to address resource concerns. In addition, through a memorandum of understanding, NRCS will work hand-in-hand with the local Soil & Water Conservation Districts, who are landowners, themselves. This group of conservation minded volunteers will provide a bridge of trust, a way to gain access and cooperation to private land and landowners. Another area of risk and uncertainty is weather related, which can cause delays in implementation. NRCS will reserve up to 10% of the implementation funds to cover weather related problems. To account for all contingencies, the project timeline is set up for 8.5 years, allowing adequate time for implementation.

NRCS has flexibility and adaptive management built into its planning process. NRCS will also use scientifically developed and field-tested conservation practice standards, which reduces the risk of uncertainties and unintended impacts.

There is a risk that future land use practices on participating private property could undermine or work at cross purposes with the expected ecosystem benefits of the program. Most of the practices in this project will address critically eroding areas, so the risk of land use changes of those specific areas would be minimal. The design process for erosion control structures can take into account predicted land use changes upstream that would increase peak runoff. Where appropriate, a safety factor can be built into the design process so that structures will function even if increased urbanization occurs in the watershed. The risk can be further mitigated by requiring the private landowner to agree to operate and maintain all conservation practices for the practice lifespan. Landowner maintenance is necessary to obtain the environmental and ecosystem benefits of this project and it will be required as a condition of project participation.

Potential Risks and uncertainties for the water quality and wildlife habitat restoration

- The program relies on voluntary incentive-based conservation on private land. It is possible that landowners that need to participate will not choose to participate. Landowners in the targeted watersheds could decline to participate for various reasons.
- Weather related events such as hurricanes and tornadoes (droughts and flooding) could cause delays in conservation practice implementation. Previously implemented practices could also be impacted through weather related events creating the need for practices to be reapplied or repaired.
- Landuse change or activities on neighboring properties could undermine or work at cross purposes with the restoration efforts of the GCCRP. This could delay or suppress ecosystem benefits.
- Landuse change such as transition to a more intensive agricultural production or urbanization of participating properties at a future date could undo the gains made to decrease nutrient and sediment runoff and cause wildlife habitat segmentation.
- Sea level rise and climate change could create conditions that make agricultural production untenable; therefore, causing the landowner to transition to a more or less intense landuse.

The risk and uncertainties outlined above are not foreign to entities who engage in conservation and restoration of natural resources on private lands. Landowners are engaged through targeted outreach and education. Landowners are provided with financial and technical assistance to incentivize the adoption of conservation practices.

Farm-based, natural resource conservation policy effectively began as a product of the twin disasters of the 1930's: the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. For much of its history its existence was closely linked to, if not dependent upon, commodity support policies, often as a tool to help manage or control production and supplies. The 1985 Farm Bill sent conservation policy off on a different

trajectory. Over the last 20 years the policy focus has rapidly shifted away from land retirement towards conservation as a part of production — working lands conservation to address resource concerns by building on stewardship principles at the heart of responsible farming (<https://policymatters.illinois.edu/a-brief-history-of-farm-conservation-policy/>).

Relative to land use change, there is a continuous effort to protect, conserve, and preserve natural resources in response to urbanization. As long as there is farm production within the Gulf Coast region, there will be a need to work with landowners to minimize the runoff of nutrient sediments from their property. Also, there will continue to be opportunities to explore restoring and maximizing wildlife habitat on agricultural lands and associated forested lands.

As outlined in Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative, conservation and restoration work on agricultural lands may provide an opportunity to address sea level rise and climate change with respect to wildlife habitat.

Conservation efforts on private lands play a critical role in providing habitat for a variety of wildlife species, including migratory birds. NRCS works with agricultural producers to create and enhance habitat for wetland-dependent migratory birds.

Millions of migratory birds, including ducks, geese, and shorebirds travel the Mississippi Flyway each year to winter in Gulf of Mexico-area ecosystems, or in the case of many shorebirds, Central and South America. A 2015 study released by Mississippi State University showed that wetlands created and enhanced by producers through MBHI provided migration and winter habitat for many more birds than unmanaged sites (<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/programs/initiatives/?cid=steldevb1027669>).

To address the risk and uncertainties described above, USDA will have to adaptively manage the program in order to respond to issues that arise associated with landowner's interest in program participation and increase urbanization of Gulf watersheds. USDA will also work with landowners to address site specific operation and maintenance issues associated with weather related events that negatively impact applied conservation practices. Corrective measures will be explored and implemented to ensure that the conservation practices are maintained for the practice useful life.

Monitoring and Adaptive Management:

Conservation practice implementation is based on site-specific needs to address water quality and/or wildlife habitat resource concerns. Technical assistance provided by professionals will help landowners to identify a suite of practices to address the resource concerns on their property. The suite of practices to address water quality and wildlife habitat is not finite. The list of conservation practices to be considered for implementation as a part of this program will be added as an attachment. The site-specific evaluation form that documents the anticipated environmental impacts and benefits of the suite of practices will also be included as an attachment.

Best Management Practices (BMPs) are farming methods that are designed to minimize adverse environmental effects while maintaining agricultural production. Nutrient BMPs, referred to as the 4Rs—Right rate, Right timing, Right source, and Right placement—should be used on all cropping systems and is the first line of defense. Additional BMPs should be used to control nutrients as they move from application area to the water resource. Put together, these BMPs form a system to avoid, control, and trap nutrients.

The first line of defense to control nitrogen and phosphorus is the use of nutrient management.

Managing nutrients is referred to as the 4Rs: Right rate, Right timing, Right source, and Right placement. Consistent use of the 4Rs will help prevent excess nutrient loss from agricultural fields into surface and ground water resources (<https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/best-management-practices-for-agricultural-nutrients>).

Anticipated environmental benefits from the implementation of a suite of conservation practices are documented in the Network Effects Diagrams. Network diagrams are flow charts of direct, indirect and cumulative effects resulting from installation of the practices. Completed network diagrams are an overview of expert consensus on the direct, indirect and cumulative effects of installing proposed practice installation. They show the potential positive and negative outcomes of practice installation.

Project performance will be captured to monitoring the progress of this project. In-stream water quality monitoring nor wildlife habitat surveys are planned for this project, so existing conservation/restoration modeling and projection tools will be used to document the success of conservation practice implementation.

Monitoring and Adaptive Management: A Monitoring and Adaptive Management Plan (MAM Plan) for the Program will be developed according to standards outlined in Council Monitoring and Assessment Program. USDA will further develop the MAM Plan and conduct project monitoring according to the plan. USDA will work with landowners to address adaptive management considerations in response to monitoring requirements and measures. In-stream water quality monitoring; laboratory processing and analysis; identification and implementation of corrective actions; and reporting are among the activities associated with monitoring and adaptive management.

Operation and Maintenance will be evaluated by USDA as specified in the conservation practice standards and may include, but would not be limited to, addressing minor soil erosion or vegetation establishment issues due to weather-related events. Operation and maintenance activities will be identified by USDA based on site evaluations and performance monitoring data and reports.

Data Management:

To the extent practicable, all field data such as site-specific treatment recommendations, BMP standards and specifications, environmental and cultural resource assessments, and data generated during monitoring activities will be documented using standardized field datasheets. If standardized forms are unavailable or not readily amendable to record project-specific data, then project-specific datasheets will be drafted prior to conducting project implementation and monitoring. Electronic files of field sheets, notebooks, GIS data, photographs, certifications, authorizations, and payments will be retained by USDA. Relevant project data that are handwritten on hardcopy datasheets or notebooks will be converted to a digital format and filed electronically. Electronic files will be named with the date on which the file was created and will include information that describes by whom the file was created and any explanatory notes on the file contents. If a data file is revised, a new copy will be made and the original preserved. Data will be available to the public consistent with Federal records management requirements and retained for a minimum of 5 years.

Collaboration:

USDA will continue to collaborate and coordinate through an extensive network of conservation partners, including DWH Trustees, other state and local agencies, and private for- and nonprofit organizations. More specifically, USDA will engage its network of public and private partnerships that work collaboratively with farmers, ranchers, and private landowners to plan and install an array of conservation measures to address water quality and wildlife habitat concerns along the Gulf. This network is well-suited to provide cost effective and timely assistance to benefit the Gulf of Mexico

ecosystem restoration effort. USDA will work closely with state and federal agencies in all states to help guide the prioritization and planning of GCCRP implementation.

Public Engagement, Outreach, and Education:

Landowner Outreach and Education: This activity will include, but is not limited to, engaging landowners within the project area to identify nutrient reduction opportunities on private lands. This activity will inform remaining phases of the Project.

Conservation Planning: Conservation Planning will be conducted on private lands to address nutrient reduction opportunities. Landowners that voluntarily sign up for the program may receive technical assistance that could result in preparation of a conservation plan outlining best management practices to address nutrient reduction on their property. Technical assistance will be prioritized to address lands that are most vulnerable to nutrient loss. USDA will use existing conservation planning processes and tools to complete activities associated with this phase. A site-specific conservation plan will be developed by collaboratively working with individual landowners.

Leveraging:

Funds: \$4,000,000.00

Type: Adjoining

Status: Committed

Source Type: Other Federal

Description: Funds committed to Gulf coast restoration through an executed agreement between USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. The funds the agreement has been committed.

Environmental Compliance:

The Natural Resources Conservation Service has categorical exclusions (CEs) which are actions that the Agency has determined do not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment and, thus, should not require preparing an environmental assessment (EA) or environmental impact statement (EIS) under the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), 42 U.S.C. 4321-4347. NRCS CE actions promote restoration and conservation activities related to natural or human induced damage or alteration to watersheds. A list of example CEs is provided below:

- Minor agricultural practices that are undertaken to maintain and/or restore ecological conditions in floodplains after a natural disaster or on lands impacted by human alteration. Examples of these practices include mowing, haying, grazing, fencing, off-stream watering facilities, and invasive species control which are undertaken when fish and wildlife are not breeding, nesting, rearing young, or during other sensitive timeframes.
- Soil erosion control measures on existing agricultural lands, such as grade stabilization structures (pipe drops), sediment basins, terraces, grassed waterways, filter strips, riparian forest buffer, and critical area planting.
- Water conservation activities on existing agricultural lands, such as minor irrigation land leveling, irrigation water conveyance (pipelines), irrigation water control structures, and various management practices.

NRCS has 70 years of experience with planning and implementation of on-going agricultural and grazing land management practices, soil erosion control measures and water conservation activities.

These activities have also been evaluated in Programmatic EAs prepared for the Farmland Protection

Program (2004 and 2009), Grasslands Reserve Program (2004 and 2009), Healthy Forest Reserve Program (2006), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (2004 and 2009), and Wetlands Reserve Program (2004 and 2009). One multi-state, regional EA for the application of common NRCS conservation practices has also been prepared entitled “ Environmental Assessment of NRCS conservation Practices Used to Address Natural Resource Concerns on Non-Federal Lands in the New England States and New York (2007).” Each of these EA’s resulted in a Finding of No Significant Impact and is inclusive of comparable actions to those listed above which are being proposed as new CEs (https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/technical/ecosciences/ec/?cid=nrcs143_026873).

In addition to the programmatic evaluations discussed above, NRCS undertakes site specific environmental evaluations (EE) to address NEPA requirements, other requirements for protection of the environment, and NRCS regulations. This evaluation will be documented in the CPA-52 (the NRCS EE form) before conservation/restoration implementation is initiated. The EE assesses the effects of conservation alternatives and provides information for the purpose of determining the need for additional consultation.

In situations where a single conservation practice may result in increased risk to the condition of another resource, additional conservation practices are integrated into the conservation plan to avoid creating new resource concerns. The EE process helps to ensure that all potential impacts to natural resources are identified and appropriate alternatives and practices are available to the landowner. Each conservation plan and contract/agreement will be accompanied by an EE.

USDA has advised the Council that this proposed program is covered by the USDA CEs discussed above. The Council is proposing to adopt these CEs and the associated environmental compliance documentation to support the proposed funding approval of this program, consistent with Section 4(d)(4) of the Council’s National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Procedures, which enables the Council to use member CEs, where appropriate. In making this decision, the Council will consider potential extraordinary circumstances, including potential negative effects to threatened and endangered species, essential fish habitat, Tribal interests and historic properties, where applicable.

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Budget

Project Budget Narrative:

The budget request for this program is \$3,100,000. It is estimated that 80% of the funds will be used for conservation practice implementation.

Total FPL 3 Project/Program Budget Request:

\$ 3,100,000.00

Estimated Percent Monitoring and Adaptive Management: 5 %

Estimated Percent Planning: 8 %

Estimated Percent Implementation: 80 %

Estimated Percent Project Management: 5 %

Estimated Percent Data Management: 2 %

Estimated Percent Contingency: 0 %

Is the Project Scalable?:

Yes

If yes, provide a short description regarding scalability.:

The level of funding will directly impact the amount of best management practices that can be implemented to address water quality and wildlife habitat. An increase or decrease in the overall budget will result in an increase or decrease in the number of acres treated and the level of restoration achieved.

Environmental Compliance

Environmental Requirement	Has the Requirement Been Addressed?	Compliance Notes (e.g., title and date of document, permit number, weblink etc.)
National Environmental Policy Act	Yes	These program activities are covered by the USDA-NRCS Categorical Exclusions referenced above.
Endangered Species Act	Yes	See USDA CE document referenced above. FWS input pending.
National Historic Preservation Act	Yes	See the USDA CEs and associated documentation referenced above.
Mangnuson-Stevens Act	N/A	See the USDA CEs and associated documentation referenced above.
Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act	Yes	See the USDA CEs and associated documentation referenced above.
Coastal Zone Management Act	Yes	See the USDA CEs and associated documentation referenced above.
Coastal Barrier Resources Act	N/A	
Farmland Protection Policy Act	Yes	See the USDA CEs and associated documentation referenced above.
Clean Water Act (Section 404)	No	In the event that a CWA Section 404 permit is required, this permit will be secured prior to implementation of the given activity.
River and Harbors Act (Section 10)	N/A	
Marine Protection, Research and Sanctuaries Act	N/A	
Marine Mammal Protection Act	N/A	
National Marine Sanctuaries Act	N/A	
Migratory Bird Treaty Act	Yes	See the USDA CEs and associated documentation referenced above.
Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act	Yes	See the USDA CEs and associated documentation referenced above.
Clean Air Act	Yes	See the USDA CEs and associated documentation referenced above.
Other Applicable Environmental Compliance Laws or Regulations	N/A	See the USDA CEs and associated documentation referenced above.

Maps, Charts, Figures

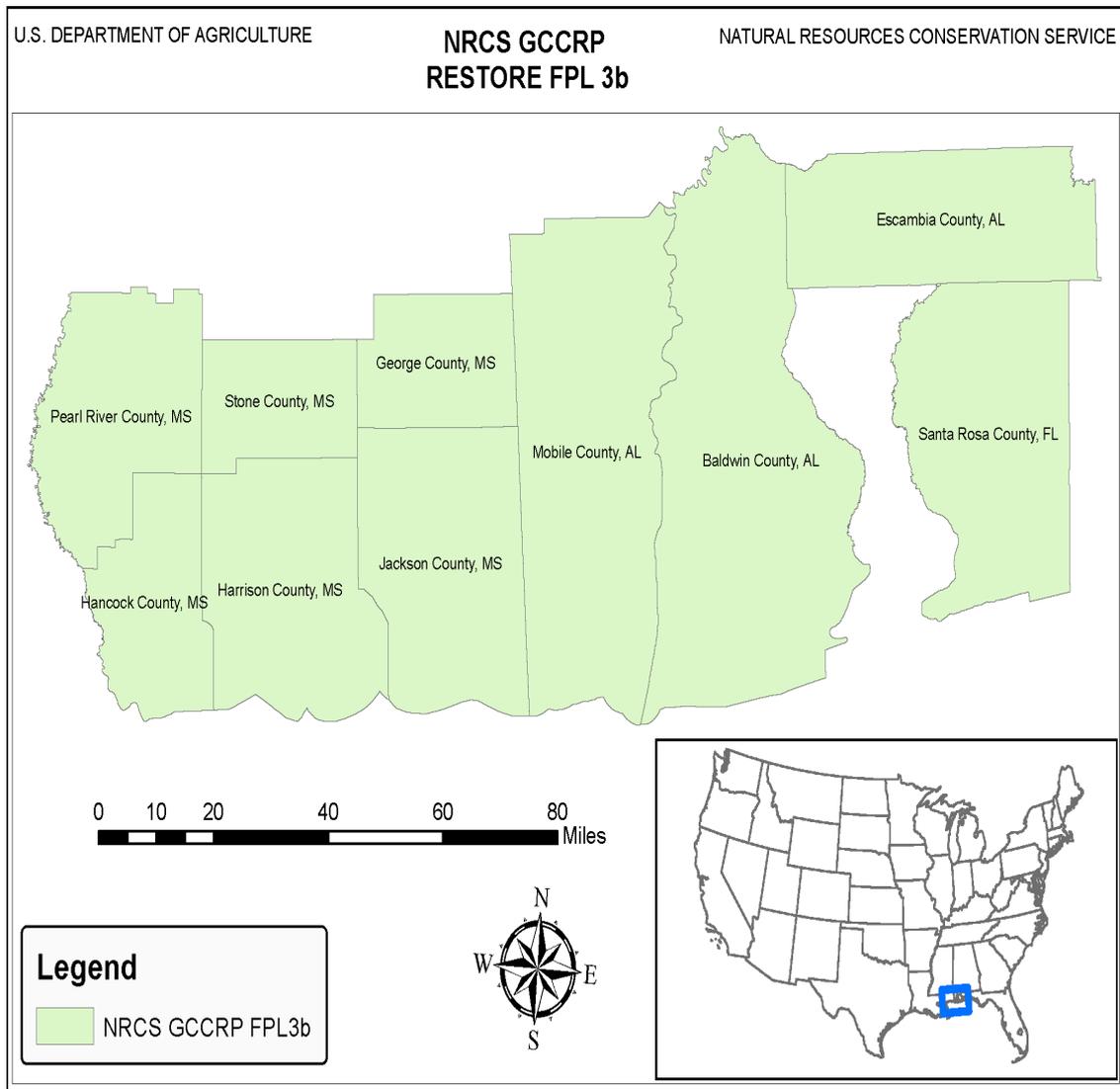


Figure 1: Map of USDA FPL3b GCCRP proposal location.

