Priority & Commitment To Plan Evaluation

Bucket 2 – Council Selected Restoration Component

PROPOSAL TITLE

Suwannee River Watershed Restoration

PROPORAL NUMBER

FL-3

LOCATION

Suwannee River Watershed within Florida

SPONSOR(S)

Florida

TYPE OF FUNDING REQUESTED (Planning, Technical Assistance, Implementation)

Planning/Technical Assistance/Implementation

REVIEWED BY:

Ebonye T. Allen

DATE:

05 February 2015

A. Comprehensive Plan Goals

Of the goals addressed by the proposal, which is the single primary goal?
Proposals should discuss how the proposed activity is designed to address the primary goal.
Check one:

- ○ Restore and Conserve Habitat – Restore and conserve the health, diversity and resilience of key coastal, estuarine and marine habitats.
- ◉ Restore Water Quality – Restore and protect water quality 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.

Notes:

As stated in the proposal, the three interrelated projects, collectively, will help restore and protect water quality, water supplies and habitat in the Suwannee Watershed; replenish living marine resources; and revitalize the local Gulf Coast economy—and the communities that depend on those natural resources and that economy—and set them on a more sustainable, resilient footing for the future. In the Suwannee River Basin, the economy is strongly based on silviculture, aquaculture, commercial and sport fishing, and ecotourism. Each depends on healthy river and estuary conditions, which are threatened by excessive nutrient levels, loss of habitat, altered coastal functions, and an imbalance of saline and

B. Comprehensive Plan Objectives

Proposals must clearly identify which objectives the proposal will address

1. Restore, Enhance, and Protect Habitats

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated ( ) N/A

2. Restore, Improve, and Protect Water Resources

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated ( ) N/A

3. Protect and Restore Living Coastal and Marine Resources

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated ( ) N/A

4. Restore and Enhance Natural Processes and Shorelines

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated ( ) N/A

Notes:

The table in the "Other" section of the proposal (page 28) further describes the manner in which the proposal meets the RESTORE Council's Comprehensive Plan Goals and Objectives.

8. Of these objectives which is the single primary objective the proposal addresses?

Check one:

- ○ Restore, Enhance, and Protect Habitats
- ◉ Restore, Improve, and Protect Water Resources
- ○ Protect and Restore Living Coastal and Marine Resources
- ○ Restore and Enhance Natural Processes and Shorelines
- ○ Promote Community Resilience
- ○ Promote Natural Resource Stewardship and Environmental Education
- ○ Improve Science-Based Decision-Making Processes

C. RESTORE Act and Comprehensive Plan Priority Criteria

All proposals must explain if the proposal addresses one or more of the priority criteria as established by the RESTORE Act and Initial Comprehensive Plan and, if so, how.

1. This project is 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.

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated ( ) N/A

2. This is a large-scale project/program that is 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.

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated ( ) N/A

3. This project is 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.

(●) YES ( ) NO

4. This project will restore long-term resiliency of the natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches, and coastal wetlands most impacted by the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill.

(●) YES ( ) NO

5. Promote Community Resilience

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated ( ) N/A

6. Promote Natural Resource Stewardship and Environmental Education

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated ( ) N/A

Notes:

As detailed in the proposal, the Suwannee Watershed covers more than 7,700 square miles in north central Florida within all or part of 14 counties. Unlike most of Florida, the coastal towns along the Big Bend have remained working waterfront communities. Horseshoe Beach, Suwannee, and Cedar Key are defined by their fishing families, who built the industry in the early twentieth century and have kept it thriving, in part through aquaculture, until the present day. The three projects in this proposal would expand upon existing conserved lands, restore resilience to oyster reefs critical to the surrounding habitat and local economy, and build upon successful water enhancement projects. The Suwannee River Watershed proposal is composed of three projects, which collectively, would restore and protect water quality, water supplies and

D. Comprehensive Plan Commitments

All proposals must demonstrate how the proposal will achieve any or all of the commitments in the Comprehensive Plan. The commitments in the Comprehensive Plan are as follows:

Does the proposal articulate how it will achieve the following commitments in the comprehensive plan?

1. Science-based Decision-Making

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated

Notes:

As described in the proposal, the three projects support restoration activities identified in adopted restoration plans for Suwannee River Watershed, including Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Gulf of Mexico Initiative and the Florida Forever Plan. The implementation methodology for each of the three projects cite peer reviewed literature for the basis of project design and implementation, supporting overall science-based decision-making.

2. Regional Ecosystem-based Approach to Restoration

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated

Notes:

As detailed in the submission, because estuaries are important to the health of Florida's Gulf Coast, the sponsor notes that an estuarine restoration and watershed theme was used as a guide to develop the proposals. The Suwannee Watershed proposal represents a large-scale, regional approach to solving water resource and habitat threats to the Florida Gulf Coast. The projects address the problem in an integrated way, enhancing community resilience and sustainability. Restoration of oyster beds results in greater freshwater entrainment in the estuary, would help clean coastal waters and expands and protects nursery habitat for fisheries. Large scale conversion of irrigation to lower water

3. Engagement, Inclusion, and Transparency

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated

Notes:

As described in the proposal, the sponsor's proposed projects involved extensive outreach activities including two public webinars, individual calls with the 23 Gulf Coast Counties, visits with state and federal agencies, discussions with nongovernmental organizations and other input received at numerous meetings hosted by others. The sponsor notes that over 1200 project ideas were submitted through a project submission portal maintained by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP). The proposal states that each one of the projects had its genesis from a submission to the portal.

4. Leveraging Resources and Partnerships

◉ YES ◯ NO ◯ Not articulated

Notes:

As described in the submission, the proposal leverages and builds upon the more than $4 million in funding sources that address water quality and habitat restoration in this watershed. The oyster reefs in the Big Bend project would leverage funds from the University of Florida to implement the project. A total of $1,575,000 is pledged as match in the form of local donations of cultch and bagged live oysters, resulting in 35.5% project implementation match and building on previously invested funds totaling $500, 000. The sponsor notes that it is anticipated that the acquisition of the conservation easement in the Lower Suwannee and Gulf Watershed would receive a match of $2 million from the State of Florida - Florida Forever funds. The Suwannee River Partnership Irrigation Water Enhancement would supplement existing state and federal agricultural best management practices cost-share programs. The cost-share would be 75% for

5. Delivering Results and Measuring Impacts

◉ YES ◯ NO

Notes:

As described in the proposal, the Oyster Reefs Restoration project would require monitoring before, during, and after restoration, measuring size and elevation of reefs, densities and sizes of oysters, and rates of colonization, growth, and water flow. Measures include oyster densities, oyster sizes, and live:dead oyster ratios. The Lower Suwannee & Gulf Watershed Conservation Easement measure of success would be closing on the acquisition of the conservation easement. The Suwannee River Partnership Irrigation Water Enhancement Program would track and quantify information on the distribution of funds; number of retrofitted systems; acreage benefiting; and the nutrient reductions, water savings

E. Meeting Commitments and Tracking and Measuring Progress

1. Does the proposal articulate how it will meet and achieve its commitments?

◉ YES ◯ NO ◯ Not articulated

2. Does the proposal have a plan for tracking and measuring progress?

◉ YES ◯ NO

Notes:

As described in the proposal, each of the projects have monitoring, success criteria, and reporting tailored to the project.

Project 1: The Oyster Reefs Restoration would measure success or progress as 1) production of a detailed restoration and construction plan, agreed to by project directors, agencies, and local fishermen during the first year; 2) full permitting within the first 12 months; 3) completion of construction by the end of year 5; 4) documentation of existing pre-construction conditions within the first year; 5) achievement of a regular monitoring program for restored and comparable unrestored reefs and comprehensive salinity and water quality grids; and 6) documentation of restored

F. Proposal Emphasis Areas

Does the submission describe how the proposed project or program addresses the following four considerations:

1. Is the proposed activity **foundational** in the sense that the project or program forms an initial core step (or steps) in addressing a significant ecosystem issue, and can future activities be tiered to substantially increase the benefits?

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated

Notes:

As detailed in the proposal, improved water quality and habitats help preserve priority habitats that multiple living resources rely on. As noted above, the three projects in this proposal would support restoration activities identified in adopted restoration plans for Suwannee River system. This proposal would leverage and build upon the more than $4 million in projects that address water quality and habitat restoration in this watershed. Future projects or activities identified in these restoration plans would increase the benefits of this proposal. Supporting projects that also occur in other restoration plans for the Suwannee area represents a foundational step in supporting restoration of the entire river

2. Will the proposed activity be **sustainable** over time?

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated

Notes:

As detailed in the proposal, risk and uncertainty have been evaluated for each of the projects in order to increase the probability of sustainability of the projects over time. The oyster reefs restoration is supported by the results of two pilot studies that have constructed reefs in the project area using the same techniques. The prediction that restored reef chains can entrain freshwater is supported by salinity measurements and modeled results. Some uncertainty may exist in regards to the numerical prediction of how much freshwater will be entrained under specific conditions, which will require further measurement and model development.

3. Is the proposed activity **likely to succeed**?

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated

Notes:

As detailed in the submission, the Suwannee River Partnership Irrigation Water Enhancement Program has no significant risks associated with this project and few uncertainties given that the demand and interest by farmers in this region to adopt new technologies exceeds current funding levels. Furthermore, the BMP technologies to be employed are known technologies developed by FDACS and the University of Florida IFAS and meeting NRCS standards. The sponsor notes that the Lower Suwannee & Gulf Watershed Conservation Easement property is owned by a single, willing, conservation-minded seller who understands the benefits the easement brings to the entire community and that the Conservation Easement acquisition has support in the local community. The project is adjacent to already successful

4. Does the proposed activity **benefit** the human **community**?
(examples of benefits may include, but are not limited to: how a project will utilize local workers, how a project will benefit geographically or socially vulnerable communities, how a project will benefit the natural resources critical to natural-resource dependent industries such as fisheries, tourism, etc.)

- (●) YES
- ( ) NO
- ( ) Not articulated

Notes:

As detailed in the proposal, local communities realize that natural areas like the ones in the proposal project areas are ecologically important, worthy of restoration and preservation, and support the economy. The timber industry is Suwannee County's largest employer, with the Suwannee Lumber Mill having an annual local payroll of more than $7 million. The Lower Suwannee & Gulf Watershed Conservation Easement would ensure that important, sustainable forestry jobs stay in the community. The Oyster Reefs Restoration would provide for long term and sustainable effects to local businesses and workers, including enhanced oyster harvest, enhanced sport and commercial fishing, and more competitive clam aquaculture economics. Growth in local businesses that serve tourist, sportfish, clam aquaculture, and