

Administrator Lisa P. Jackson

Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force Meeting in New Orleans, LA

February 28, 2011

As prepared for delivery.

Thank you and welcome to the second meeting of the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Task Force. This is one of many gatherings we will be hosting as we set our restoration efforts in motion. We are joined today by many members of the Task Force, and our Executive Director. The ultimate purpose of this meeting is to hear from you and get your input on how we should move ahead. We will be holding these meetings throughout the region to ensure that every voice is heard. Like the immediate response to the spill, this is an all-hands-on-deck effort. Anyone and everyone who can help in this effort must have a chance to do so. That is what this Task Force is meant to facilitate.

The Gulf of Mexico is one of America's greatest and most diverse treasures. We know that it is home to some of the most extraordinary habitats and wildlife – wetlands, migratory birds, deep sea and shallow water aquatic life. And we also know that those many natural resources are under threat – and have been since well before the BP spill.

The area holds 30 percent of the Nation's coastal marsh, about three million acres. Those three million acres are critical habitat for millions of birds. Louisiana's wetlands alone provide wintering ground for 70 percent of the nation's migratory waterfowl.

We also have 90 percent of the continental US coastal marsh loss: every 38 minutes, a football field sized parcel of land turns to open water. This land loss makes our communities, infrastructure, ports and other resources vulnerable. And this destruction is further unbalancing our ecosystem, taking away critical nurseries and habitats. Louisiana has lost an average of 34 miles of land per year for the last half century. The region is also averaging estuarine emergent loss of more than 5,500 acres a year.

Now, at the same time we are losing the necessary resources to filter pollution and maintain the balance of the ecosystem, we are seeing rapid increases in nutrient pollution. In the past half-century nutrient build-ups along the coast have led to increased dissolved oxygen levels – which are dangerous to marine life. The area in the northern Gulf of Mexico over the Louisiana and Texas continental shelf is the largest hypoxic zone – or dead zone – in the United States, and the second largest for the world's coastal ocean.

All of these resources are essential to the millions of people who live in this area. The Gulf Coast is an extraordinary uniter of the five states that share a single coastline, and a constant reminder that what

happens in one part of the Gulf often affects every part of the Gulf. In the years ahead, the population here is going to grow. The coastal population of the five states of the Gulf of Mexico is projected by the Census Bureau to increase by nearly 40 percent between now and 2025.

The natural beauty here also explains why, every year, millions more people come to visit the Gulf Coast. They come to vacation, to sail, to swim, to fish, and to enjoy these great waters. In 2008, national and international tourists spent about \$145 billion in the 5 coastal states. That economic activity in travel and tourism employed about 1.7 million people.

And of course, tourism is just one of the many incredible economic drivers provided by these waters: The waters produce 1.3 billion pounds of commercial fish and shellfish annually. There is \$367 million dollars at dockside from shrimp -- 73 % of total US shrimp production...\$ 60 million dollars in Oysters, or 59% of US total production.

The region is also home to a \$29 billion dollar-per-year agriculture industry. There is also \$124 billion from oil and gas exploration and recovery which provides another 55,000 jobs. And seven of the top ten busiest ports in our country are along the Gulf Coast. Sixty-five percent of the nation's maritime trade passes through these Gulf ports. In fact, if you added up the output from Gulf trading it would make up the 6th largest economy in the world. As has been so correctly noted so often, this is a working coast. And it is critical to the nation.

When the Gulf is thriving, the economies of the five Gulf States supported more than 19 million jobs and nearly \$2.5 trillion of the U.S. GDP in 2008. Thirty-six percent of the region's employment is in coastal communities, with an even greater percentage in some states, like Louisiana, where 80 percent of the jobs reported are along the coast.

What these numbers really represent is a way of life and a culture that depend on a healthy, vibrant, and economically strong Gulf community. We have seen all too often in recent years how that way of life can be changed when the Gulf is not thriving.

The hurricanes of 2005 and 2006 showed how these coastal communities are vulnerable. And we need to help them become more resilient. During the BP spill, we essentially "lost" the Gulf for a period of several weeks. We lost the use of valuable fishing grounds and almost had to do without shrimp and oyster po'boys. We lost months of tourism dollars that your communities count on. And we lost the intangible things – the benefits of having a thriving, vibrant ecosystem as part of our community.

From that, we learned just how difficult and costly it was to do without those things, even for a short while. That was a small price compared to what will happen if we lose the Gulf for good. The needs of the people, the environment, and the economy are linked. A system in balance will support the people, the communities, the environment and the economy. Multiple lines of defense against flooding, land loss, hurricanes and climate change are necessary.

This Task Force is a chance for us to restore this ecosystem and reap all the benefits that come with it. It is an opportunity for us to work together – to join together – and harness all of the work, and thinking, and studying that has been done to address these challenges.

In recognition of all that has happened, but more importantly, all that is yet left undone, the President has charged this Task Force of federal and state officials to begin a transition from coastal response to coastal recovery. The Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force will start now to align efforts that address the long decline of our coast. State and local governments, the private sector, tribes, our scientists, and our citizens have great plans. We want to help shape these plans into a comprehensive and coordinated mobilization.

On a personal note, I am grateful to the President and the people of the Gulf for the chance to serve the region I call home. This opportunity is something very special for me – combining my life's passion, a healthy environment for our children and grandchildren, with the opportunity to give something back to the region that shaped and nurtured me. As someone who grew up on the Gulf Coast, I know that the challenges facing this ecosystem go back much further than the BP spill. We are here to respond to that single devastating event. However, a full restoration will not be possible unless we address the environmental problems that have plagued this region for many years.

The President is committed to rebuilding this region. He has heard you and stands with you – as do I and all of these other folks who have been blessed enough to call this home. If you look around, you can see the many, many people who are dedicated to this effort. All of you have a part in it too.

Together we can be successful. Our sum is much greater than our parts. And this Task Force is here to help integrate those parts into a whole, collaborative, unifying effort. I look forward to working with you all in this effort. Thank you very much.