



Vision for a Healthy Gulf of Mexico Watershed

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service offered its *Vision for a Healthy Gulf of Mexico Watershed* in July 2013 to partners and stakeholders. The complete 24-page document is available online at www.fws.gov/gulfrestoration.

Summary

The Service developed the *Vision* to engage the public and develop meaningful partnerships with States, communities and the conservation network. The Service's goal is to participate in conversations about how to most effectively restore the Gulf of Mexico and its watershed to address the damage not only from the nation's largest oil spill, but also some of the natural resources lost over the decades. We will be successful when the shrimper in the Gulf and the farmer in the Midwest understand how they both benefit from a restored Gulf.

The Service identified eight conservation strategies to serve as our guiding principles for Gulf restoration. They are:

- Use sound science;
- Restore resources impacted by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill;
- Create a network of protected lands through voluntary agreements;
- Restore wetland and aquatic ecosystems;
- Conserve prairies and forests;
- Protect and restore coastal strand, barrier island and estuarine island habitats;
- Conserve working lands; and
- Manage lands and waters for sustainable populations of fish and wildlife.

The Service also identified 16 conservation focal areas. (See map). These are the places the Service views as the most time critical areas for conservation, either because they need immediate attention to reverse decline, or because action is needed now to secure future benefits.



1 Laguna Madre and Rio Grande River Valley; **2** Coastal Bend; **3** Austin's Woods and Prairies; **4** Chenier Plain; **5** Atchafalaya River Basin; **6** Mississippi River Delta, Coastal Wetlands and Barrier Islands; **7** Northern Gulf Coast; **8** Panhandle Beaches; **9** Panhandle Lands; **10** Apalachicola River Basin; **11** Big Bend; **12** Southwest Florida; **13** Mississippi Alluvial Valley; **14** Upper Mississippi River; **15** Rainwater Basin; and **16** Prairie Potholes.

While the Service's focus is on the public's fish and wildlife resources, we recognize the Gulf of Mexico and its watershed is also an important economic engine, producing crops that feed the nation and oil and gas to power it.

An Unprecedented Response

The catastrophic Deepwater Horizon blowout event on April 20, 2010, claimed 11 lives and resulted in direct and immediate repercussions to people and the economic and ecological resources along the Gulf Coast.

One consequence of the disaster is the legislative and judicial actions that direct civil and criminal penalties towards Gulf restoration. To date, more than \$6 billion has been collected from parties responsible for the oil spill, with many more claims to settle. Those funds have been directed to the five Gulf States, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the National Academy of Sciences, and

Federal agencies. While much of the funds must be spent along the Gulf Coast, there will be opportunities to address upstream issues in upstream states, including water quality and quantity, migratory fish and bird habitat needs, recreational needs, invasive species and wildlife habitat fragmentation and connectivity.

What's at Stake

A healthy Gulf supports a multi-billion dollar economy with ripple effects throughout the watershed and the nation. This vast watershed, which provides rich soils to feed the nation and oil and gas to power it, is critically important to the health and vitality of our nation's natural and economic resources. The Mississippi Flyway supports 40 percent of all North American migrating waterfowl and shorebirds, and the coastline is the first line of defense against storm surges and rising sea levels.



Upper Ouachita NWR (USFWS)

Working with Private Landowners

Farmland, ranches, commercial forests and other working lands secure the nation's food supply, provide a boon to local economies, reduce flood and storm risk, clean our air and water, and provide valuable habitat for fish and wildlife. The Service recognizes private landowners are the primary stewards of the nation's natural resources. The Service is working closely with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to achieve common goals of conserving wildlife by working with private landowners to engage in conservation while maintaining their land as a working landscape. By working more effectively and in concert with private landowners through incentives and voluntary actions, together we will be able to maintain the public's fish and wildlife populations long into the future.

The *Vision* also recognizes the responsibility landowners carry, especially for downstream neighbors. For example, a major threat to the recreational and commercial fish in the Gulf of Mexico is the influx of nitrogen from areas within the Gulf watershed. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, the two states yielding the highest nitrogen load into the Gulf are Illinois and Iowa. Nitrogen comes from a variety of sources in urban and rural environments, but the predominant source is agricultural runoff. This excess

nitrogen, has led to hypoxic conditions, or lack of oxygen, in Gulf waters from the Mississippi River Delta to Texas. This dead zone is devoid of aquatic life.

The *Vision* will not be used to create mandates or develop new regulations. Rather, the conservation actions suggested are **voluntary**, such as cooperative agreements and conservation easements, and are intended to be implemented with existing programs and partnerships. These include NRCS' Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI), which not only protects wildlife, but also reduces production costs and improves efficiencies for farmers, ranchers and foresters.

Next Steps

With input from partners and stakeholders, the Service is working on a follow-up document to the *Vision* titled a *Blueprint for a Healthy Gulf of Mexico Watershed*, which will offer details and specific recommendations to accomplish high priority conservation objectives. The *Blueprint* will be available later this fall.

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For more information about the Service's *Vision*, please go to www.fws.gov/gulfrestoration

A Watershed-Wide Restoration Effort

More than half the continental U.S. drains into the Gulf of Mexico. The Service recognizes that the national investment toward a sustainable Gulf will be at risk if the coastal region is restored and together we fail to address the causes of water pollution, dead zones, invasive species and fragmented wildlife habitat throughout the watershed. Because everything flows downhill, activities in places as distant as Bismarck and Pittsburgh affect New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico.

The Service is committed to ensuring that the important conservation issues for fish and wildlife resources across the Gulf and its watershed are part of the Gulf restoration conversation.



Florida Panhandle dune (USFWS/Melody Ray-Culp)