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RESTORING THE GULF OF MEXICO FOR FISH AND WILDLIFE: NEW REPORT

NEW ORLEANS, LA - Today, one of America's leading wildlife conservation groups released a report outlining 47 projects that would improve the health of the Gulf of Mexico in the wake of the 2010 oil spill.

"We can't undo the oil spill, but we can take concrete steps to make the Gulf of Mexico a better place for fish and wildlife," said Steve Bender, director of National Wildlife Federation's Vanishing Paradise campaign. "This type of comprehensive habitat restoration will measurably boost populations of fish and waterfowl."

[Restoring the Gulf of Mexico for People and Wildlife: Recommended Projects and Priorities](#) takes a broad look at restoration efforts that would benefit all five Gulf Coast states—Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas. The recommendations emphasize restoring the areas where rivers flow into the Gulf of Mexico, such as the Mississippi River Delta. These places are important nurseries for marine life and provide wintering habitat for waterfowl.

Money for restoration projects could come from the billions that BP and the other companies responsible for the 2010 spill will pay in fines and penalties. Much of this money will ultimately be distributed to the Gulf states for restoration.

"Over the past hundred years, we've made major changes to the way our rivers flow into the Gulf of Mexico," added Bender. "The results have not been pretty for fish and wildlife. Restoring degraded coastal habitats will help numerous species of fish and these habitats are also critical for the millions of waterfowl that winter or stopover on the Gulf Coast."

The report's 47 proposals can be grouped into these five general categories:

1. **Restoring Wetlands:** Wetlands play a critical role in the Gulf ecosystem—creating habitat for fish and wildlife, filtering pollutants, stabilizing shorelines and providing protection from storms. Over the past

eight decades, the Gulf Coast has lost an area of wetlands larger than the state of Delaware, largely in the area of Louisiana known as the Mississippi River Delta.

2. Restoring Sediment: The Mississippi River is hemmed in by man-made levees; the river sediment that once nourished the delta's wetlands is now propelled deep into the Gulf. If all of the 19 recommended projects in Louisiana were built, together they would sustain, restore and rebuild as many as 300 square miles of wetlands that would otherwise be lost by 2060.

3. Restoring the Balance between Fresh and Saltwater: Estuaries are created where fresh water from rivers mixes with saltwater from the Gulf. In most of the Gulf's estuaries the natural balance of fresh and salt water has been dramatically altered. The report recommends fixes for many of the Gulf's major estuaries, including the Everglades and Apalachicola Bay in Florida as well as five systems in Texas.

4. Restoring Oyster Reefs: An adult oyster can filter as much as 50 gallons of water per day, and oyster reefs provide important habitat for many economically important species of fish, such as redfish, shrimp, and blue crabs. Oyster reefs also create physical structures that can protect coastal communities from storms. Restoring oyster reefs is a key element in several of the recommended projects in the report, for example in Mississippi's Biloxi Bay and Bay St. Louis.

5. Protecting Critical Landscapes: In a few select places, the report recommends purchasing key parcels of coastal lands to protect them in perpetuity. For example, the report recommends adding lands to Alabama's Grand Bay and Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuges.

The report is aimed at informing a series of decisions that will be ultimately made for funds flowing from the Gulf oil disaster, including those to be made by Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council. The federal-state council is tasked with implementing a comprehensive restoration plan to include a list of projects prioritized for their impact on the Gulf ecosystem. The council recently [released a list of projects and programs](#) proposed for funding with oil spill penalty money.

"America's hunters and anglers want to enjoy a restored Gulf of Mexico," said Bender. "We owe it to future generations to make sure the oil spill dollars are spent on projects that will really make a difference."

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