

April 14, 2016

Chris Doley
Chief, Restoration Center
NOAA Fisheries, Office of Habitat Conservation
1315 East-West Highway SSMC3
14th Floor F/HC3
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Via email and hard copy

Re: Ocean Conservancy recommendations for open ocean restoration strategic planning in the Natural Resource Damage Assessment

Dear Mr. Doley:

On behalf of our organizations, we would like to thank the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) for its continued leadership in the *Deepwater Horizon* Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) process, which laid the groundwork for settling Natural Resource Damage (NRD) claims with BP. NRD funds are critically needed to address impacts from the BP *Deepwater Horizon* oil disaster and to make important investments toward comprehensive restoration of the Gulf ecosystem. We remain enthusiastic about the opportunity for \$1.24 billion in “open ocean” spending to advance our shared restoration, sustainability and resilience goals for these important trust resources. We also thank NOAA for its diligence and dedication to addressing impacts in the marine environment, where the blowout occurred.

As NOAA and the other Trustees transition from early restoration to the full implementation of NRDA and begin implementing the comprehensive science, adaptive management and restoration framework outlined in the Programmatic Damage Assessment and Restoration Plan (PDARP), we offer the following recommendations for NOAA’s consideration during this incredibly important year of planning and coordination:

- 1. Develop a single strategic framework governing all open ocean resources.** This document should serve as a programmatic vision for how the restoration approaches, monitoring, adaptive management and science to fill critical gaps will work across all open ocean resource categories. Resource-specific plans would then tier off of the larger framework and describe how and where specific restoration projects support this larger vision for resource and marine ecosystem restoration, and where they intersect with other resource plans.
- 2. Spend open ocean money in the marine environment.** The top priority for open ocean funding must be the restoration and enhancement of open ocean resources through project implementation, improved management or science in support of management and recovery. Our expectation is that open ocean NRD money will be spent directly on activities aimed at recovery, science to fill critical gaps that inform management actions, or monitoring activities in support of adaptive management in the marine environment.

- 3. Define the role for regionwide and state implementation plans in restoring open ocean resources.** Coastal and marine systems are inextricably connected, and we envision NOAA playing an essential role in developing and advising on implementation plans for regionwide and state Trustee Implementation Groups (TIGs), where coastal projects are deemed important for recovery of open ocean resources. Some marine species have important life history stages or face stressors in coastal environments, and the strategic framework for open ocean resources should describe how and when other TIG implementation plans will support their recovery. This integration in restoration implementation will ensure the comprehensive vision described in the PDARP is realized.
- 4. Explicitly include ‘science to fill information gaps’ as a restoration approach for all open ocean resources.** With precious few exceptions, the resources slated for open ocean funding suffer from massive gaps in our understanding of population status, trends, vital rates and characterization of stressors.¹ Restoration approaches for these resources must include collection of the science to fill these gaps and inform restoration strategies. Nothing in the Oil Pollution Act, the NRDA regulations or this PDARP prohibits the use of NRD funding for science and research of this kind. Indeed, a cornerstone of any NRDA restoration program is measuring barriers preventing recovery to baseline, and we expect to see science play a prominent role in the open ocean resource restoration approaches going forward.
- 5. Establish a decision framework for adaptive management.** In addition to the science necessary to fill critical information gaps, funding should clearly and deliberately follow an adaptive management decision framework. This framework should lay out at least these three things: 1) projects that act on existing information to mitigate stressors, 2) a monitoring agenda that will tell us if the prescribed restoration approaches are having the desired effect, and 3) decision points for where new information from project monitoring and parallel efforts to fill science gaps will inform course corrections to existing restoration approaches and the adoption of new ones. This framework should look comprehensively across all of the open ocean resources, look ahead at over 15 years of decision-making, and be made available to the public.

The PDARP describes a laudable vision for open ocean restoration, and fulfilling its vision will take smart planning, targeted science, coordinated monitoring and adaptive program management. The consent decree finalized in April 2016 represents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to establish the Gulf of Mexico as a model for implementing effective, adaptive and innovative restoration of a large marine ecosystem. More importantly, of course, it is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to put the Gulf region on a path to long term environmental and economic prosperity, and we look forward to participating in the development of the strategies and tools to make this a reality.

We look forward to continued engagement with NOAA and the other Trustees in realizing this important goal. Please contact Ocean Conservancy at 504-208-5814 to discuss these recommendations in more detail or if you have questions.

¹ Love, M., Baldera, A., Robbins, C., Spies, R. B., & Allen, J. R. (2015). *Charting the Gulf: Analyzing the gaps in long-term monitoring of the Gulf of Mexico*. New Orleans, LA: Ocean Conservancy.

Sincerely,

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