WRITTEN STATEMENT FROM THE
NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD OF THE LEGISLATIVE HEARING ENTITLED "LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON H.R.6352, H.R.8836, H.R.8632, H.R.8413, Graves Discussion Draft"

BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER, WILDLIFE, AND FISHERIES
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SEPTEMBER 10, 2024

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is responsible for the stewardship of the nation's living marine resources and their habitat. NOAA's Office of Habitat Conservation protects and restores habitat to sustain fisheries, recover protected species, and maintain resilient coastal ecosystems and communities. For decades, NOAA has engaged with our partners on significant habitat restoration initiatives in coastal communities across the country, including in the Gulf of Mexico. These efforts include our work through the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection, and Restoration Act (CWPPRA) to restore Louisiana coastal habitat, our Damage Assessment, Restoration and Remediation Program (DARRP) including restoration addressing the Deepwater Horizon (DWH) oil spill, and our Community-based Restoration Program (CRP). NOAA appreciates Representative Grave's and the Committee's attention to coastal restoration needs in support of fisheries and coastal communities in Louisiana.

Importance of our Coastal Habitats in the Gulf of Mexico

The Gulf of Mexico region is one of the most ecologically and economically productive ecosystems in the world. Recreation, leisure, and tourism industries contribute significantly to the Gulf economy employing millions of people. The Gulf of Mexico supports some of the largest recreational and valuable commercial fisheries in the nation with commercial landings of approximately 1.6 billion pounds in 2015[1] (NOAA, 2024). Unfortunately, the Gulf of Mexico region is also experiencing one of the highest rates of coastal land loss, mostly wetlands, in the world. In addition to the ecological impacts, the loss of coastal wetlands reduces coastal resilience for millions of U.S. citizens facing threats of sea level rise and increasing intensity of hurricanes. Many of these populations are in underserved or socially vulnerable communities.

[1] https://www.aoml.noaa.gov/ocd/ocdweb/ESR_GOMIEA/

Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection, and Restoration Act (CWPPRA)

Under CWPPRA, the Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Conservation and Restoration Task Force (an interagency task force consisting of NOAA, the Army Corps of Engineers, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the National Marine Fisheries Service, and the State of Louisiana) is helping to restore Louisiana's coastal habitat. Since 1990, the CWPPRA Program has served as the primary means for responding to coastal wetland loss in Louisiana. CWPPRA's roughly $80 million annual construction budget typically supports two projects per year. Through this task force, NOAA works with its state and federal partners and landowners to fund and implement restoration projects. To date, NOAA has been the federal sponsor for 29 constructed CWPPRA wetland restoration projects with an estimated cost of approximately $474 million, restoring more than 13,707 acres of vulnerable coastline. NOAA is engaged in the active design and construction of additional projects, with the goal of restoring 2,500 acres of habitat.

Damage Assessment, Restoration and Remediation Program (DARRP) including the Deepwater Horizon (DWH) Oil Spill

For over 30 years through the DARRP, NOAA has assessed and restored coastal environments damaged by oil spills, hazardous waste releases, and vessel groundings. Working with partners from state, tribal, and federal agencies and industry, we have recovered over $10 billion dollars to restore a wide variety of critical habitats and resources nationwide. In the Gulf of Mexico, NOAA and co-trustees have resolved nearly 40 pollution events (excluding Deepwater Horizon) with a restoration value of approximately $151 million. Associated restoration actions improved coastal resilience, enhanced recreational uses such as fishing, and employed local contractors for engineering and construction.

Working with federal and state partners, NOAA played key roles from the earliest moments after the DWH spill—responding to the spill, assessing the damage, developing restoration plans, and implementing on-the-ground restoration projects. Since the spill, NOAA has been working with our partners and affected communities to plan, implement, and evaluate activities to restore natural resources injured as a result of the spill. This work is driving hundreds of restoration projects across the Gulf. NOAA's restoration work is focused on fish, marine mammals, sea turtles, Gulf sturgeon, marine and coastal habitats, and deep-Gulf ecosystems. To date, NOAA and the other federal and state Trustees have committed over $5 billion to almost 300 restoration projects and activities.

Community-based Restoration Program (CRP)

Since 1996, CRP has conducted habitat restoration by executing large-scale competitive funding opportunities and providing expert technical assistance. Projects awarded range from improving access to habitat by removing dams and other barriers, to restoring coral and oyster reefs, to rebuilding coastal wetlands. The program is currently executing historic levels of funding provided through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act, including over $120 million invested in projects located in the Gulf of Mexico.

Supporting our Partners through Technical Assistance

Through all of these different programs, NOAA's Office of Habitat Conservation plays an integral role in restoration efforts by providing support through the entire restoration process. In collaboration with partners, our team provides technical expertise on project planning, engineering and design, grants administration, regulatory requirements and project management. We also provide support through engagement and outreach, relationship-building, and sharing lessons learned and best practices. Because many of them live and work in the coastal communities we serve, including five locations across the Gulf of Mexico, they are uniquely positioned to engage in a way that is tailored to the needs of each community and ecosystem, and to help navigate hurdles that may arise.

Conclusion

In conclusion, NOAA values the opportunity to continue working with Representative Graves and this Committee on this important issue and supports additional habitat restoration in the Gulf of Mexico. NOAA will continue to invest and support our partners working in this important area. Thank you and your staff for your work to support NOAA and restoration in Louisiana and the Gulf of Mexico.