Restoration Plan and Environmental Assessment #5: Living Coastal and Marine Resources— Marine Mammals and Oysters Public Webinar Transcript

April 8, 2020

Niamh Micklewhite: Hi everyone and welcome to the webinar for the Louisiana TIG Marine Mammal and Oyster Restoration Plan. It looks like many people are still in the process of joining, so please be patient as we wait for more to join.

Hi everyone, once again welcome to the webinar for the Louisiana TIG Marine Mammal and Oyster Restoration Plan. Please be patient as we wait for a few more attendees to join, and we will begin shortly.

Hi everyone and thank you for joining us today to discuss the Louisiana Trustee Implementation Group Draft Restoration Plan and Environmental Assessment (RP/EA) #5: Living Coastal and Marine Resources— Marine Mammals and Oysters, or Draft RP/EA #5 or "plan" for short. My name is Niamh Micklewhite from Industrial Economics, Inc., and I'm a contractor to NOAA. My colleague, Michaela Murray, and I will be helping with logistics for today's webinar.

If you are having any technical difficulties, please use the questions box on the right-hand side of the webinar interface to reach a staff member. We have muted all participants for the duration of the webinar. At the end of the webinar, you will have the opportunity to provide comments on the plan. We will take those as written comments submitted via the questions box on the right-hand side of the webinar interface. My colleague Michaela will then read those comments aloud. At the end of the webinar, we'll review how you can use the questions box to submit comments.

You may enter your comments at any time during the webinar, but we will also leave some time at the end of the presentation for comments to be submitted. We will not be responding to comments on the webinar today, but we will consider your comments in finalizing the plan.

Once again, thank you for joining us. We hope you find the webinar informative, and we look forward to receiving your comments on the plan. Now, I'll pass things over to Mel Landry of NOAA's Restoration Center who will get us started with the presentation today.

Mel Landry: Thanks, Niamh. We can now begin the presentation on the draft restoration plan we are seeking your feedback on. I am Mel Landry, and I am the Deepwater Horizon (DWH) Louisiana Restoration Area Lead for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). After the presentation of the draft restoration plan, we will open the meeting for public comment via the chat box.

Mel Landry: As you may know, the Trustees held many meetings prior to the settlement with BP and many more since that time. This evening we're holding a public webinar for the release of the Louisiana Trustee Implementation Group's Restoration Plan #5.

Tonight's agenda is as follows. First, I'll go over some slides that will give you an update on what the Louisiana Trustee Implementation Group, which we'll call the Louisiana TIG, has been working on. Then we'll have a presentation on the Draft RP/EA #5 for Living Coastal and Marine Resources (LCMR) and

open up the floor for comments from listeners. The projects proposed to restore oysters will be presented by Brady Carter of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF), and the project proposed to restore marine mammals will be presented by Erin Fougeres of the NOAA. After the Louisiana TIG presentation and public comments, we will close this webinar.

Mel Landry: Just as a quick review of our responsibilities–

The Trustees are responsible for restoring the environment and compensating the public for natural resource injuries resulting from the DWH oil spill. We used a natural resource damage assessment to determine the extent of injuries to natural resources and to seek restoration or compensation from the parties responsible for those injuries.

The goal is to restore injured natural resources—such as wetlands, oysters, and marine mammals—to the condition they would have been in had the spill not occurred. We are also responsible for addressing recreational uses—like boating and swimming—that were affected by the spill.

Mel Landry: The Louisiana Trustee Implementation Group includes representation from 5 state Trustees and 4 federal Trustees. The federal Trustees are the Department of Interior represented by John Tirpak, the NOAA represented by myself, Mel Landry, the Environmental Protection Agency represented by Doug Jacobson, and the Department of Agriculture, represented by Ron Howard. The state Trustees are the Coastal Protection Restoration Authority, the LDWF, the Department of Environmental Quality, the Department of Natural Resources, and the Louisiana Oil Spill Coordinator's Office, all represented today by Brady Carter of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

Mel Landry: Now I'll give you a bit of background on the DWH oil spill and restoration process that will bring you up to where we are today. As this timeline shows, the oil spill began 10 years ago this month, on April 20, 2010. The oil flowed for 87 days, but we didn't wait until the flow stopped to begin the injury assessment. We began right away. A year after the incident, in April 2011, BP agreed to make up to $1 billion available for restoration even before the injury assessment was complete, so we were able to get a jump start on restoring injured resources.

From 2011 to 2016, the timeframe of Early Restoration, we approved a total of five restoration plans and 65 projects across the Gulf of Mexico with a combined cost of $866 million. Generally speaking, these projects restored marshes, beaches, shorelines, sea grasses, oysters, fish and shellfish, wildlife, and recreational uses. In Louisiana, we approved four projects during Early Restoration, including marsh creation, barrier island restoration, oyster restoration, and bird restoration.

Four years ago, on April 4, 2016, the federal government and the five Gulf states reached a settlement with BP; it totaled approximately $20.8 billion. Of the $20.8 billion, up to $8.8 billion will go to natural resource restoration across the Gulf, with $5 billion specifically for restoration in the Louisiana Restoration Area, which is managed by the Louisiana TIG. Since the settlement, we have continued working hard to advance restoration of the Gulf. You'll hear more about those efforts later in this presentation.

Mel Landry: When an incident like an oil spill takes place, laws direct that federal and state Trustees be identified to respond and assess the injuries to natural resources and the public, work on remediation, and eventually take on restoration. Since this is such a huge restoration effort, the largest ever in the U.S., the state and federal Trustees established Trustee Implementation Groups, often referred to as TIGs.

The TIGs guide the work in the different Restoration Areas. These provide flexibility and accountability that allow for the differences between Restoration Areas and Trustees. A Trustee Council ensures coordination among the TIGs. Today, we're focusing on the work of the Louisiana TIG.

Mel Landry: All of the Trustees finalized a programmatic restoration plan in February 2016. We will refer to this document as the PDARP throughout the rest of this presentation. The PDARP does not include individual projects; rather it is programmatic, which means that it includes overarching restoration goals for the entire Gulf ecosystem and broad restoration types that guide the development and selection of restoration projects. The slide you see here highlights those restoration types in the far-right column. Today, we will be focusing on a couple of those restoration types, which are oysters and marine mammals.

Mel Landry: The settlement with BP also determines where funds will be spent. The funds are broken out first geographically—into Restoration Areas aligned by state geography, as well as funds for the Region-Wide and Open Ocean Restoration Areas. Then, the funds are divided by each restoration type in those areas, such as marine mammals and oysters for Louisiana as we'll be focusing on today.

The slide you see in front of you highlights in red where the Louisiana Restoration Area allocation intersect with the marine mammal and oyster restoration types. I know this slide is difficult to read, so we have the information for the Louisiana Restoration Area broken down in the following slides. You can also find a copy of this table on the Trustee website.

Mel Landry: This pie chart shows the allocation of funds between Restoration Areas. You can see that the Louisiana Restoration Area gets the largest allocation, totaling $5 billion.

Mel Landry: The $5 billion in funds for Louisiana are subdivided into five restoration categories. As you can see, the vast majority, over $4.3 billion, will go towards projects that restore and conserve habitat. Other categories include Monitoring and Adaptive Management and Oversight, Recreational Uses, Living Coastal and Marine Resources, and Water Quality. From these funds, the federal and state agencies of the Louisiana TIG execute projects that restore for injuries in ways that align with their unique mission.

Mel Landry: The settlement with the responsible parties occurred only four years ago and payments didn't begin until a year later. Since that time, the Louisiana TIG has released several restoration plans, which initiated work on dozens of projects. Though these plans are numbered, the order of publication has not always been chronological, so I may jump around with the dates as I briefly describe these.

As mentioned previously, in January 2017, we released our first restoration plan, "Restoration of Wetlands, Coastal, and Nearshore Habitats; Habitat Projects on Federally Managed Lands; and Birds."

That plan was written to fund engineering and design activities for six restoration projects, including two bird island projects, three coastal wetlands projects, and one habitat project. RP/EAs #1.1, #1.2, and #1.3 were published between 2019 and 2020 and present the design alternatives for those projects and select the specific design alternative for construction.

In July 2018, we released the Final RP/EA #2 which allocates $22 million of funds toward four recreational use projects. In March 2018, we released the Final Strategic RP/EA #3 to guide future restoration of wetland, coastal, and nearshore habitats in Barataria Basin. Draft RP/EA #3.3: Large-scale Marsh Creation – Upper Barataria Marsh Component, released last month and currently available for public review through April 20th, tiers from this plan and provides an evaluation of design plans for the large-scale marsh creation project that was selected by the TIG in the Strategic Restoration Plan #3.

Also in July 2018, we released the Final RP/EA #4, which proposes several projects that either address nutrient reduction in Louisiana's coastal wetlands or enhance recreational opportunities. Lastly, in December of 2019, we released the Draft RP/EA #6, which evaluates four projects intended to restore and conserve wetlands, coastal, and nearshore habitats.

In addition to these RP/EAs, we have completed several supplemental documents to address adjustments to individual projects in order to accommodate changes in individual projects since initial approval.

Mel Landry: The projects we'll be discussing today will use funding from the LCMR category, which is further subdivided into five restoration types. The amounts shown here are the funding available for these restoration types, as was shown in the table earlier, after the Early Restoration projects were funded. Tonight, we will be discussing the Draft RP/EA #5, which was released on March 20, 2020 and seeks to allocate approximately $29 million in LCMR funding for the marine mammal and oyster restoration types in Louisiana.

Mel Landry: The preferred alternatives identified in the Draft RP/EA #5 address the programmatic restoration goal of replenishing and protecting LCMR in the Louisiana Restoration Area, focusing on the marine mammal and oyster restoration types. Other Louisiana TIG plans in the past and future have or will include projects focused on the other LCMR funding restoration types, such as birds, sea turtles, and submerged aquatic vegetation.

Mel Landry: This figure illustrates the stepwise screening process that the Louisiana TIG undertook to arrive at a reasonable range of alternatives to evaluate in the Draft RP/EA #5.

Overall, we received 193 marine mammal and 36 oyster project ideas from the general public and federal and state Trustees. Through these additional screening steps, here as you see them on the screen, we arrived at a reasonable range consisting of two marine mammal projects and four oyster projects, all of which are evaluated in detail in the Draft RP/EA. Part of this screening process included identifying whether projects were aligned with the restoration approaches that we choose to focus on for this plan, which we'll discuss in more detail later in this presentation.

The detailed evaluations in the Draft RP/EA assess a project's compliance with the Oil Pollution Act (OPA) and National Environmental Policy Act, or NEPA. The Oil Pollution Act criteria include a project's cost-effectiveness, nexus to the injured natural resource, and likelihood of success, as well as the extent to which the project would result in collateral injury, benefit multiple resources, and impact public health and safety. NEPA analyses provide a framework for federal agencies to determine if their proposed projects will have significant environmental impacts and related social and economic impacts. Also, they consider these impacts when choosing between projects. Finally, they inform and involve the public in the environmental analysis and decision-making process. We will now discuss the two marine mammal projects and four oyster projects that received OPA and NEPA evaluations.

And with that, I will hand it over to Erin Fougeres with NOAA to discuss the marine mammal projects. Take it away, Erin.

Erin Fougeres: Thanks, Mel. The PDARP discusses multiple approaches to restoring marine mammals. For this plan, NOAA, who is the lead agency for this project, selected the restoration approach to "Increase marine mammal survival through better understanding of causes of illness and death as well as early detection and intervention for anthropogenic and natural threats."

As noted previously, the screening process resulted in two marine mammal projects that were evaluated in detail in the Draft RP/EA #5. One project is preferred for implementation with a total cost of $3.1 million. Since Louisiana has a $50 million dollar allocation for marine mammal restoration, there will be additional opportunities for the public to suggest marine mammal restoration projects that would satisfy any of the restoration approaches listed on this slide.

Erin Fougeres: The first marine mammal project evaluated in the Draft RP/EA #5 is "Increasing Capacity and Expanding Partnerships along the Louisiana Coastline for Marine Mammal Stranding Response to Inform Future Restoration Efforts." This project will cost approximately $3.1 million over the five-year implementation period. This project is preferred for implementation. The Louisiana TIG identified that it meets all the OPA criteria and would result in negligible to minor adverse impacts under NEPA.

Erin Fougeres: To provide context for this project, we'll start with some history about marine mammal strandings. The nationwide Marine Mammal Stranding Network (MMSN) was formalized by the 1992 Amendments to the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Volunteer stranding networks exist across all coastal states and are authorized by the NOAA Fisheries to respond to live and dead marine mammal strandings.

On average, approximately 81 cetaceans strand along the coast of Louisiana each year. Of these, 5% are found alive and 95% are found dead. The most commonly stranded species is the bottlenose dolphin, which accounts for 86% of all strandings. From January through August 2019, there were more than 110 bottlenose dolphin strandings in Louisiana, with the majority of those occurring between February and May. Due to resource limitations, only 52% of those dolphins were responded to or examined by stranding network personnel.

Historically in Louisiana, LDWF and Audubon Nature Institute divided marine mammal stranding

response activities; LDWF typically provided first response and necropsy of most live and dead stranded cetaceans, and Audubon provided veterinary assistance and rehabilitation of live stranded cetaceans. However, in September 2019, LDWF transitioned roles to establish Audubon as the primary stranding response organization in the State. As stranding network responsibilities have changed and with the increase in strandings observed in 2019, NOAA has identified an urgent need to increase existing capacity for marine mammal stranding response by expanding partnerships along the Louisiana coastline.

Erin Fougeres: The objectives for this project are listed on the screen here, but in general, the proposed project would include hiring a Stranding Coordinator to build partnerships and fill gaps in capabilities and coverage along the coast. The Stranding Coordinator and authorized network partners would receive necessary trainings and resources, such as personnel, equipment, supplies, to enhance capabilities to collect, store, and analyze samples collected from stranded cetaceans in order to improve our understanding of their population health. If identified as necessary, additional resources and equipment would be made available to enhance the Audubon marine mammal rehabilitation facility's ability to care for live stranded marine mammals. The Stranding Coordinator would also improve and distribute outreach materials in order to increase public awareness and reporting of stranded animals.

Again, this project would cost approximately $3.1 million for the five-year implementation period. Additional methodology and monitoring details are provided in the Draft RP/EA #5.

Erin Fougeres: The next marine mammal project is the "Region-wide Marine Mammal Conservation Medicine and Health Program." This project would develop and implement a conservation medicine and health program in Louisiana to identify risks for illness and death in marine mammals. This project would cost approximately $6.3 million over the five-year implementation period.

Erin Fougeres: Project funding would support the establishment of a working group consisting of federal and state agency scientists and other marine mammal researchers who would identify Louisiana-specific threats both natural and man-made to marine mammals. This group would also assess and implement marine mammal health intervention techniques such as vaccinations, rapid point of care tools, and real-time diagnostic instrumentation, such as remotely deployed electrocardiograms.

In addition, this project would establish regular training sessions and workshops for MMSN personnel and marine mammal health researchers to disseminate information about the identified threats to marine mammals and various health monitoring techniques. Lastly, this project would develop and implement a study plan for capture and release health assessments of marine mammals to evaluate population-level health changes over time, including the identification of emerging threats and diseases.

After the OPA evaluation, the Louisiana TIG determined that this project is not preferred for implementation at this time. It would benefit from implementation of the preferred alternative first, as the MMSN collects information that will inform methodologies, approaches, and targeted needs for the conservation medicine and health program. In addition, implementing the Stranding Network first would make this alternative more cost effective. Thus, not preferred at this time, this alternative could be reconsidered in a future restoration plan.

With that, we transition into the projects proposed for oyster restoration. These will be presented by Brady Carter of LDWF. LDWF will be implementing the oyster projects described in this presentation.

Brady Carter: Thanks, Erin. Good afternoon everyone. As Erin mentioned, I work for LDWF, and I'm the Coastal Resources Scientist Manager for the Office of Fisheries.

The Louisiana TIG focused on oyster projects that met one or more of the four restoration approaches in the PDARP and outlined on the screen here. Restore or create oyster reefs through placement of cultch in nearshore and subtidal areas. Construct living shorelines. Enhance oyster reef productivity through spawning stock enhancement projects such as planting hatchery-raised oysters. And, develop a network of oyster spawning reef reserves. The overall goal of these approaches is to restore abundance, resilience, and diversity of oyster reef habitats in Louisiana.

As noted previously, the screening process resulted in four oyster projects that are evaluated in detail in the Draft RP/EA #5. Each of the projects will be discussed during the next few slides. After OPA and NEPA evaluations, three projects were proposed as preferred for implementation, totaling approximately $25.6 million.

Nearly all of the $26 million allocated by the Consent Decree for oyster restoration in Louisiana would be utilized through the three preferred projects. Although, as you will see when we discuss each of the preferred projects, they include programmatic restoration approaches for constructing oyster source and sink reefs to help restore for the injury caused by lack of recruitment for multiple generations.

Locations of programmatic areas would be informed by need and supported by data, allowing successful oyster restoration actions to be conducted expeditiously in the future within the Louisiana Restoration Area. Additional restoration for oysters could be funded through projects under the Wetlands Coastal and Nearshore Habitat restoration type.

Brady Carter: First is the Enhancing Oyster Recovery Using Brood Reefs project. This project takes a programmatic approach, allowing multiple reefs to be constructed within public oyster areas across coastal Louisiana suitable to producing oysters.

The objective of this project is to construct a network of spawning stock oyster reefs to increase spawning oyster populations. Brood reefs will be closed to harvest for as long as they remain functioning spawning stock reserves, as determined by maintaining vertical relief above seafloor. Brood Reef and Spawning Stock Reserve are used interchangeably in RP #5 to describe the general design concept of this feature. That being, reef material of large surface area arranged 1.5-4 feet above bay bottom to provide a concentration of spawning oysters, help survival through periods of hypoxic conditions, and potentially reduce predation.

The cost of this alternative is approximately $9.7 million for full programmatic approach, which will provide for the implementation of multiple brood reefs, along with four years of monitoring funds for

each. This project is preferred for implementation. The Louisiana TIG identified that it meets all the OPA criteria and would result in negligible to minor adverse impacts under NEPA.

Brady Carter: One planned component of this project would establish two reefs in the Lake Machais/Mozambique Point area and two reefs in the Petit Pass/Bay Boudreaux area as can be seen on the map to the right. Each of the four planned reefs would be up to 10 acres in size, closed to oyster harvest, and constructed out of materials with large surface area. Brood reefs would generally be constructed upstream in the estuary to allow for transport of oyster larvae downstream to existing oyster reefs and hard substrates.

The Draft RP/EA outlines a programmatic process whereby additional brood reefs may be constructed in Chandeleur Sound or within any state-managed Public Oyster Seed Grounds (POSG) or Public Oyster Seed Reserves (POSR) in Louisiana. These areas where investigations may be made for siting additional brood reefs are depicted by the dark blue dotted lines on this map and show that the majority of Public Oyster Areas (POAs) have been identified. This is to allow reefs to be situated in areas with greatest need for restoration while maintaining the potential for a coast-wide distribution of reefs, thus providing resilience for Louisiana oyster resources.

Hydrologic conditions and substrate suitability are examples of the type of information that would be considered for determining specific locations of additional reefs. In general, these reefs would be constructed on relic oyster reef or existing shell substrate and would be closed to harvest for as long as the reefs remain functioning spawning stock reserves, retaining vertical relief, as mentioned before.

Brady Carter: Next, we have the Cultch Plant Oyster Restoration project. The objective of this project is to create oyster reefs through the placement of cultch in order to increase oyster abundance and spawning stocks. This project also takes a programmatic approach, allowing multiple cultch plants to be placed on public oyster areas in coastal Louisiana conducive to producing oysters.

The cost of this alternative is approximately $10.1 million for full programmatic approach, which will provide for the implementation of multiple cultch plants, along with four years of monitoring funds for each. This project is preferred for implementation. The Louisiana TIG identified that it meets all of the OPA criteria and would result in negligible to minor adverse impacts under NEPA.

Brady Carter: This alternative would entail placing cultch at several locations on POSG and POSR with relic reefs. Targeted sites include one on POSG in the Grand Banks area of Mississippi Sound and one on the Caillou Lake, also known as Sister Lake, POSR in Terrebonne Parish. Approximately 200 acres would be planted at a density up to 200 tons per acre, resulting in a depth of two to ten centimeters of substrate.

The Draft RP/EA outlines a programmatic process whereby additional cultch plants would be constructed on POSG or POSR in the Biloxi Marsh Complex and on other state-managed POSG or POSRs in Louisiana. These areas are depicted by the dark blue dotted lines on this map. Similar to how programmatic Brood Reefs would be sited, additional locations to restore oyster reef through addition of cultch would be selected after considering habitat suitability on the public oyster area nominated.

Brady Carter: Next, we have the Hatchery-based Oyster Restoration project. The objective of this project is to enhance oyster reef productivity and spawning stock in Louisiana. Spawning stock enhancement projects would include hatchery production of oyster larvae, planting hatchery-raised oysters, and relocating oysters to restoration sites.

The cost of this alternative is approximately $5.8 million over the 10-year implementation period. This project is preferred for implementation. The Louisiana TIG identified that it meets all of the OPA criteria and would result in negligible to minor adverse impacts under NEPA.

Brady Carter: This alternative would provide funding to support 10 years of operations at the Michael C. Voisin hatchery in Grand Isle, Louisiana, which was constructed with Early Restoration funds.

The objective is to produce approximately 500 million diploid larvae per year. The majority of larvae produced will be used for POSG restoration activities, and some used to help promote water-based oyster culture in Louisiana. Hatchery-produced oysters offer the opportunity to artificially increase oyster production in areas with suitable hydrology and substrate that lack recruitment. Once the planted oysters mature, they contribute to the network of spawning stock reefs and enhance the overall oyster population. In addition, maintaining regional hatchery production capacity supports other oyster restoration projects in the region that depend on the availability of spat.

Brady Carter: Lastly, we have the Caillou Lake Artificial Oyster Reef project. The cost of this alternative is approximately $21.5 million.

The objective of this project is to engineer an artificial oyster reef in Caillou Lake, locally known as Sister Lake that would produce oysters, absorb wave energy, protect the adjacent shoreline, and minimize water column turbidity between the reef and the shoreline, fostering sediment accretion.

Brady Carter: This project would construct approximately 21 miles of artificial oyster reef along the shorelines most susceptible to erosion near Caillou Lake, namely the land bridge that separates the lake from the Gulf of Mexico. The project would use proven engineered reef technology and would likely consist of gabions, in other words cages, cylinders, or boxes that are filled with limestone or shell that is clean and free of contaminants.

This alternative would be executed in three phases. During Phase I, approximately seven miles of reef would be constructed, mostly along the northern end of the central island in the land bridge. During Phase II, another seven miles of reef would be constructed. A four-mile section would be split into two, two-mile sections to the east and west of the Phase I reef, and these sections would be arranged in the same manner as the Phase I reef. The remaining three miles would be placed along the southern shoreline of the central island in the land bridge. Phase III of this alternative would construct approximately five miles of reef to the west of the southern, three-mile section of Phase II, and another two miles of reef to the east.

It's hard to decipher on the map here, but for those familiar with this area, it's the southern rim of Sister Lake and northern rim of Caillou Bay between Grand Bayou Dupont in the west and Bayou Grand Caillou in the East.

For those familiar with this area, it's the southern rim of Sister Lake and northern rim of Caillou Bay, between Grand Bayou du Large in the West and Bayou Grand Caillou in the East, and some adjacent shorelines.

After the OPA evaluation, the Louisiana TIG determined that this project is not preferred for implementation. The cost-effectiveness of this project is uncertain due to a lack of similar existing projects. The project has a moderate likelihood of success, but recruitment of oysters on the reef after construction is uncertain.

For wrapping up our projects, I will kick it back to Mel Landry.

Mel Landry: Thanks, Brady. This wraps up the discussion of each of the six projects evaluated in the Draft RP/EA #5.

To conclude, this map outlines the area for all four preferred projects. The preferred marine mammal project will span the entire Louisiana coastline as illustrated by the yellow line, and the triangles and dashed blue lines illustrate areas for planned and programmatic oyster projects. The four projects preferred for implementation in this Draft RP/EA total approximately $28.7 million.

Mel Landry: Now we will move to the public comment portion of this webinar. We are hoping to hear your thoughts on whether the four preferred projects should go forward as proposed, whether there should be some adjustment to them, or whether there is some information about the project environments that NOAA was not aware of and would benefit from hearing. We are also interested in hearing any thoughts about why the non-preferred alternatives should go forward.

To reiterate, the three preferred oyster projects will use all of the funding allocated for oyster restoration in Louisiana, so there will not be any other opportunities to comment on oyster restoration for the oyster allocation. Conversely, there will be an additional opportunity for giving input on future marine mammal projects. The public is able to upload project ideas through the DIVER Restoration Portal, accessible via NOAA's Gulf Spill Restoration Site. You can find the link to this site on the slide, and at la-dwh.com. On NOAA's site you can also sign up for regular email updates for the latest DWH restoration news.

All public comments regarding DWH restoration plans must be submitted using the approved public comment process, as listed on the screen. Comments left on social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, are not considered for submission via the formal process. The public comment period for the Draft RP/EA #5 that we've discussed this evening closes on April 20th of this year.

Lastly, we want to inform you that there are a few additional restoration plans that will be released in the near future, such as RP/EA #3.2 for the Mid Barataria Sediment Diversion. We will schedule additional public meetings or webinars where we will welcome public comment on those projects.

I will now turn it to Michaela to guide us through the public comment process.

Michaela Murray: Thanks. Hello everyone, my name is Michaela and I will be reading the comments that we have received during today's presentation.

If you haven't submitted a comment yet and you would like to, you can do this now via the chat box on the bottom of the webinar control panel, which is illustrated on this slide. Due to the limited capacity of the chat box feature, we recommend keeping comments rather brief. If you have longer comments, feel free to submit them after this webinar either online or by mail. If you have already typed your comment in another document and you wish to submit it now, you can copy and paste it into the chat box. After you've finished typing out your comment, hit "send." We will read comments aloud in the order in which they are submitted. As mentioned before, we will not be responding to these comments today, but they will all be considered in the final plan which is expected to be released this summer.

I will now start to read comments we have received thus far, but please continue to submit your comments, and I will continue to read them as they come in. We look forward to hearing your thoughts.

The first comment comes from Vicki Cornish, who says: "What is the schedule for developing restoration projects for the remaining $47 million allocated for marine mammals. And which on the other seven restoration approaches outlined in the PDARP does the LA TIG consider to be priorities for marine mammal restoration in Louisiana." Thank you for your comment and question, Vicki.

The next comment also comes from Vicki. She asks: "Is it appropriate for marine mammal restoration plan funds to be used to replace stranding response capabilities that the state of Louisiana has historically provided but only recently withdrawn." Thank you for your comment, Vicki.

Those are the comments we have received thus far, but I will pause for a few moments to let any remaining comments come in.

We will give people just about another minute or so to finish submitting any comments. We haven't received any more thus far.

Okay, so we haven't received any more comments, so that wraps up today's webinar. Please remember that you can continue to submit comments through April 20th. Visit gulfspillrestoration.noaa.gov for more information on how to submit additional comments online or by mail. Thank you all for joining today's presentation. Have a good evening.