

# *Deepwater Horizon Open Ocean 2020 Annual Meeting*

November 5, 2020 Webinar – Presentation Script

Slide 1: Open Ocean Trustee Implementation Group Annual Meeting, November 5, 2020

Welcome to the Open Ocean Restoration Area Trustee Implementation Group's Annual Meeting. My name is Gale Bonanno. I'm the U.S. EPA representative for the Open Ocean Trustee Implementation Group. Thank you for joining us today. We are happy to see that over 115 people have registered for today's webinar. Today we'll share information about our work for the Open Ocean Restoration Area. And look forward to answering your questions following our presentation. Before we start, I'd like to ask Stephen Heverly with NOAA to go over the webinar tools that you may want to use today.

Slide 2: Webinar Participation

Thank you, Gale. Hi, everyone. I'm Stephen Heverly, a contractor with the NOAA Restoration Center, I'd like to quickly run through some webinar logistics with you. Hopefully everyone's logged in to the webinar by now. You should be able to see the control panel on the right-hand side of your screen – which is shown on this slide. If you're using a phone for audio, you should all be dialing in using the phone number provided by GoToWebinar—that's the number and access code listed under "Audio" in the control panel.

Please note that only presenters will be heard over the phone during the webinar; attendees will be muted. Under the audio tab, you should also see a link to a PDF handout in the control panel as well. That handout is an Open Ocean Restoration Area fact sheet to help you follow along. There are a lot of projects we'll be talking about today. This fact sheet has a summary of recent activities, and the names of all the Open Ocean restoration and monitoring projects.

Finally, please also take a look at the "Questions" box at the bottom of the control panel – where the green and blue arrow is pointing. If you have questions about the presentation topics along the way, we encourage you to enter those in the "Questions" box at any time. Although, you'll also have an opportunity to submit questions at the end of the presentation, if you plug them in early, it can help us organize them ahead of time. After our presentation, we'll answer as many questions as we can in the time allotted. We'll also post the presentation slides and a transcript of the webinar to the [GulfSpillRestoration.noaa.gov](http://GulfSpillRestoration.noaa.gov) website in a few days. Now back to Gale to go through our agenda for today.

Slide 3: Today's Agenda

Thank you, Stephen. During today's webinar we'll provide an overview of the Open Ocean Trustee Implementation Group's representatives and status of our restoration work and funding. We will also provide an update of our recent and upcoming activities; an update on Open Ocean restoration projects; and tell you how you can find more information. Then we'll have time for questions.

#### Slide 4: Open Ocean Trustee Representatives

I'd like to introduce the members of the Open Ocean Trustee Implementation Group, which are shown on this slide. The Open Ocean Trustee Implementation Group, referred to as a TIG, is one of seven Gulf of Mexico Restoration Areas established to conduct restoration for the Deepwater Horizon Natural Resource Damage Assessment. The four federal natural resource trustees are the members of this TIG, and we work together to plan and implement restoration for fish, sturgeon, birds, sea turtles, marine mammals, and deep-sea communities injured by the 2010 BP oil spill. All of our work is consistent with the programmatic restoration plan finalized by the Trustee Council in April 2016. The Open Ocean TIG also coordinates with the five Gulf state trustees, especially when restoration overlaps state jurisdictions.

#### Slide 5: Open Ocean Restoration

The TIG has made substantial progress in planning and implementing restoration for Open Ocean resources. This includes projects approved during Early Restoration. In 2020, we completed two Early Restoration projects that focus on restoring lost recreational use. One project enhanced accessible recreation at Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge in coastal Alabama and the second project built two ferry boats for improving visitor access in the Pensacola, Florida area for the Gulf Islands National Seashore. Implementation and monitoring continues for two additional Recreational Use enhancement projects and one Fish and Water Column Invertebrate project approved in Early Restoration planning. Implementation is also being conducted for three Monitoring and Adaptive Management (or MAM) Activities, approved in 2019, for Gulf Sturgeon and Marine Mammals. And in 2020, we began implementation of 21 restoration projects that were approved in 2019 for birds, sturgeon, marine mammals, sea turtles, fish, and mesophotic and deep benthic communities. We've provided a fact sheet that lists the restoration projects approved by the Open Ocean TIG in the Handouts section of the control panel. We'll talk more about these projects and activities later in the presentation.

#### Slide 6: 2020 Funding Update

The Open Ocean Trustee Implementation Group has committed approximately \$326 million dollars for restoration planning and implementation or about 26% of our total allocation of \$1.2 billion dollars. These funds are being used to implement 26 restoration projects across all restoration types in the Open Ocean Restoration Area and three Monitoring and Adaptive Management Activities. In addition, these funds are used to conduct restoration planning and stakeholder outreach and to provide oversight and comprehensive planning by the federal Trustees serving on all seven of the trustee implementation groups.

#### Slide 7: Open Ocean Activities Update

Next, Laurie Rounds with NOAA will present more information about the Open Ocean TIG's planning and restoration activities.

## Slide 8: Open Ocean TIG Activities

Thank you Gale. As you can see on this timeline graphic, the Open Ocean TIG has completed several activities to support both monitoring and adaptive management and restoration planning. To effectively implement monitoring and adaptive management, we developed the Open Ocean MAM Strategy in 2019. The Strategy laid out the TIG's MAM goals and the processes we'll use to conduct MAM planning. Later in 2019, we also started work on 3 MAM activities to address critical information needs for Gulf Sturgeon and Marine Mammals. We will provide more information about this work later in the presentation. Building on these efforts in 2020, the TIG identified an initial set of priority information needs to advance restoration planning and evaluation. We released these priorities in our updated MAM Strategy in June. Looking forward to 2021, the TIG will identify opportunities to implement our MAM Strategy; activities may include inventorying existing data related to our MAM priorities, engaging stakeholders and technical experts, and developing activities for a subset of the TIG's priorities.

The Open Ocean TIG has also made substantial progress to initiate restoration. In 2019, we finalized two restoration plans with public input for six Open Ocean restoration types. These plans selected a total of 21 projects. During 2020, we shifted from planning to implementation for these projects, which we will talk more about later in the presentation. This year, we also began work to evaluate strategies for future restoration to address the complex injury to fish and water column invertebrates caused by the oil spill.

Looking ahead to 2021, the TIG will continue to examine how to best restore for the injury to fish and water column invertebrates, including reaching out to stakeholders, resource managers, and technical experts. We will also begin our next restoration planning effort for one or more Open Ocean restoration types. We will begin the next restoration planning cycle with a call for project ideas to get input into restoration opportunities.

## Slide 9: Early Restoration

Next, we'll provide an update on the work the TIG is doing to implement restoration for each of the 7 restoration types under the Open Ocean TIG. I'll begin with an early restoration project for the Fish and Water Column Invertebrates Restoration Type – The Oceanic Fish Restoration Project. We are currently implementing one early restoration project for the Fish and Water Column Invertebrates Restoration Type – The Oceanic Fish Restoration Project.

NOAA is the lead trustee, and we're working in partnership with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Gulf Pelagic Longline fishing community. The goal of this project is to restore pelagic fish by reducing mortality in the Pelagic Longline Fishery in the Gulf of Mexico. Work has been ongoing since late 2015.

The project consists of a fishermen stepping up to participate in a voluntary pause in use of their pelagic longline gear from January through June. They are offered the option to continue to fish using alternative gear that results in less bycatch so they can continue fishing for yellowfin tuna and swordfish. During the past year, the project completed its fourth season.

Participation has continued to increase over the years – 12 in total from Louisiana and Florida participated in 2020 -- our highest number yet. When the season wrapped up in July, the project team held a series of virtual workshops to collect input from those who participated, and begin planning for 2021. The application and selection process for next year's season began in October. We are excited that we will have another large number of participants in 2021.

The project has already seen success. Data collected shows clear bycatch benefits from past project years. The amount of bycatch species caught using alternative gear was minimal during the project, and many of those that were caught were released alive. We are continuing to evaluate the project and anticipate releasing a more comprehensive monitoring plan, including additional data, next year. Next, Ashley Mills will provide an overview of additional Open Ocean projects.

#### Slide 10: Early Restoration Recreational Use

Thanks Laurie and hello everyone. I'm Ashley Mills of the Department of the Interior. We are currently implementing two projects approved in Early Restoration to restore for lost recreational use. To enhance recreational use and visitor satisfaction, we are continuing to remove asphalt debris and road-base rock from the beach sand across Fort Pickens, Santa Rosa and Perdido Key areas of Gulf Islands National Seashore in Florida. The asphalt debris ranges in size and shape from large slabs down to brick and pea-size.

Thus far over four seasons, we have enhanced 574 acres of beach and 5 acres of nearshore tidal wetland. Nearly 20,000 tons of asphalt and road base material have been removed from beaches and nearshore tidal wetland areas. Now in the fifth and final season, we are finishing the asphalt removal activities and planting vegetation in a small portion of the cleaned area where vegetation was impacted in the process of removing asphalt and road-base debris.

#### Slide 11: Early Restoration Recreational Use

We are also continuing engineering and design work to enhance bike and pedestrian access in the Davis Bayou area of coastal Mississippi on National Park Service lands through construction of multiple-use trails. The project plans to widen the existing road surface on Park Road for just over two miles to accommodate multiple-use bicycle-pedestrian trails. Next, I'll transition into updates on projects more recently approved, after the settlement.

#### Slide 12: Gulf Sturgeon

We are implementing multiple efforts to build the foundation of restoration for Gulf sturgeon. Through the use of sonar mapping, acoustic telemetry, and fin spine microchemistry, we will identify potential Gulf sturgeon spawning habitat, habitat use and origins of juvenile sturgeon within the Pearl and Pascagoula River systems. Our monitoring activities focus on examining population dynamics and habitat use of juvenile sturgeon, and characterizing sturgeon population status and trends across the species range.

Collectively this sturgeon work will provide information needed to effectively prioritize restoration activities, protect areas of important habitat, and provide a suite of baseline metrics to evaluate restoration success. In 2020 we incorporated over 30 years of mark recapture data into the Gulf sturgeon databases, rolled out the database project to partners at a February workshop in Gainesville, developed standardized data entry forms and software for data entry on tablets.

Our next milestone is to complete a quality check of the database, complete the first draft of the population assessment and implement tablets in all Gulf sturgeon monitoring efforts. Efforts to capture, tag, and monitor juvenile sturgeon commenced in all seven sturgeon river systems, as teams worked around delays and setbacks associated with the ongoing pandemic.

#### Slide 13: Birds

We are also implementing two projects for bird species that were injured by the spill. One project targets restoration of black terns in the prairie pothole region of North and South Dakota. Through this project, we are establishing conservation easements with private landowners to protect important wetland and upland habitats where black terns nest in the Midwest.

Project managers have been working to identify recent, active tern colonies and prioritize parcels for wetland and grassland easements. Thus far, several conservation easements are pending and a few others have been identified. Another bird project we are implementing is focused on restoration of Common loons in Minnesota. I'll talk more about the loon project on the next slide.

#### Slide 14: Restoration of Common Loons in Minnesota

Common loons experienced significant injury because of the spill. This bird species breeds and spends substantial time outside the Gulf of Mexico. We are implementing a project to reduce mortality and increase reproductive success of Common loons at breeding, nesting, and migration staging locations in Minnesota by focusing on three specific restoration activities:

- Acquiring parcels or establishing conservation easements of lakeshore loon nesting habitat;
- Providing artificial nesting platforms for loons in targeted lakes; and
- Reducing loon exposure to lead-based fishing tackle.

Last winter, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency staff and the Get the Lead Out team, in partnership with the Trustees, began engaging with the public on the topic of the harmful effects of lead tackle on common loons. They staffed booths at five outdoor sporting shows. Team members racked up about 1,500 surveys about attendees' tackle use and opinions on its potential wildlife impacts. They also distributed about 3,500 sample packs of lead-free tackle.

This past spring, the project team began reconfiguring the 2020 activities and quickly revamped the approach to sharing the Get the Lead Out message. The team is engaging Minnesotans virtually through social media and partners, such as lake and river associations, to increase the use of non-lead tackle. That is brief overview of our current Early Restoration Recreational Use projects, as well as our Gulf Sturgeon and Bird projects. Next, Dan Van Nostrand of NOAA will talk about the rest of the projects. I'll turn it over to Dan!

Slide 15:

Thanks, Ashley, I'm going to provide general information about the portfolio of sea turtle, marine mammal, mesophotic and deep benthic communities and fish and water column invertebrates projects approved in the December 2019 Restoration Plan 2 and the monitoring activity approved in the TIG's August 2019 Monitoring and Adaptive Management Activities Implementation Plan.

I'll be going over a lot of projects in the next slides. Please refer to the handout which as a list of those I'll go over here, and others.

The suite of 18 large-scale, innovative projects represents the largest investment of funding towards restoring these resources in the Gulf. We were excited to kick these efforts off and, despite working remotely through the majority of 2020, the teams have been able to make steady progress.

Many of these projects began their early phases in the spring of this year and the timeline on this slide shows that we're in the initial project planning phases for these projects and some monitoring has started. Notably during our initial project planning efforts we prioritized and sequenced the start of each project, ensured internal staff capacity was available to start the highest priority projects, and began to further plan out the projects in more detail. The end result of which will produce roadmaps for implementing the projects over the three to 15 years they will take place.

We've established steering committees for one fish, one sea turtle, and two marine mammal projects and invested significant effort on developing a cross-agency project management structure to support the four mesophotic and deep benthic communities projects to ensure the teams take advantage of shared resources and identify opportunities for synergies in their implementation activities. And we started baseline monitoring activities for another marine mammal project, aimed at reducing impacts of noise on cetaceans, to make sure we have a continuous, long-term data set to measure its outcomes.

Slide 16: Open Ocean Restoration Partnerships

Recognizing that, 1, these are the first of many projects to come over a number of years; and we need to foster existing and build new partnerships to bring capacity for them, and also help build capacity for the long-term work ahead. And, 2, that, in addition to the expertise within our Trustee agencies, we need to harness the creativity and expertise of outside partners to

successfully implement the suite of innovative and complex projects. Here's a look at some of the initial partnerships we've established or are exploring for these projects.

In the fish project portfolio: We've established an initial partnership with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation for our communications network project and with Louisiana and Texas Sea Grants for our Better Bycatch Reduction Device project. They'll support continued project development and communication and engagement activities, including industry outreach. You'll also hear about another fish project, aimed at restoring recreational reef fish, in more detail a bit later.

In the sea turtle project portfolio: We established partnerships with the Archie Carr Center for Sea Turtle Research and the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge to support our In-water Data Collection and Nesting Beach Habitat Protection projects. Further, we have partnered with and continue to work collaboratively with the menhaden industry on a project to better understand observation of sea turtle interactions in that fishery.

In the Marine Mammal project portfolio (across all these projects, the marine mammals we focus on are cetaceans – whales and dolphins): We have established partnerships with the Gulf of Mexico Coastal Ocean Observing System, the Southeast Coastal Ocean Observing Regional Association and Axiom Data Science on our project developing a new digital platform to house multiple, currently disparate, Gulf marine mammal data sets. With Scripps's Institute of Oceanography on the noise impacts reduction project. And finally, with the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research to support both the noise impacts reduction project, and our monitoring activity that is evaluating the cumulative Impacts of different stressors marine mammals.

In the mesophotic and deep benthic communities portfolio, the teams have been busy establishing initial working relationships between the various NOAA offices and Department of Interior bureaus to initiate the planning phase of the projects and will continue through 2020 and 2021 to develop and cultivate partnerships.

This was a quick rundown, and if you'd like additional information, please ask during the Q&A later.

#### Slide 17: Upcoming Stakeholder Engagement

We remain committed to the stakeholder engagement described in the Restoration Plan and the Monitoring and Adaptive Management Plans. This slide shows some examples of activities that we've done in the past, are doing currently and are planning for in the future.

During early phases of each project, stakeholder engagement planning involves identifying key project stakeholders and conducting initial outreach. We also intend to continue using existing venues such as the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council and holding more specific restoration type update meetings in 2021 where we will provide more detailed project

updates. As the projects progress, the stakeholder engagement will broaden, but will look different for each project depending on the project's specific needs.

For example, some projects will establish Technical Work Groups, others will conduct stakeholder workshops, some projects will have one-on-one and small group engagement opportunities, and other projects will have direct participation by stakeholders in project activities. In 2021, a variety of activities will take place. Outreach and engagement with key stakeholders up and down the fishing industry will start for the Better Bycatch Reduction Device Project. The team will present at industry meetings and workshops, conduct dockside outreach, and create outreach materials to inform stakeholders about the project and recruit participants.

The Fish Communication Networks project will engage with specific segments of the fishing industry to determine which fisheries show the greatest promise during this planning phase of the project. The marine mammal data compilation platform project mentioned earlier will establish a steering committee and then begin reaching out to data stakeholders to help inform the design and needs for the platform.

Beyond 2021, stakeholders will continue to be essential to provide feedback and beta testing to refine the performance of the platform. The Small Bar Spaced Turtle Excluder Device project team will establish a technical working group with at least one representative from each Gulf State and then conduct a series of industry workshops later in 2021 to engage with stakeholders on how they can provide input during the project.

The mesophotic and deep benthic communities teams are currently conducting a series of introductory meetings with project stakeholders while continuing the planning phases. These stakeholders will be essential toward working closely with the project teams on data inventory and analysis tasks. As the projects continue through their lifecycle, stakeholders will continue to hear from project teams at various in-person and virtual events, through publication of technical reports, and other avenues. I'll now turn this over to Jamie Reinhardt for a deeper dive into our recreational fish restoration project.

#### Slide 18: Reducing Barotrauma in Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish

As a reminder the Reducing Barotrauma in Reef Fish Project is a \$30 million project that will focus on the development of best practices for fish descender devices by distributing them to recreational anglers and providing education on their use.

The eight-year project is aimed at reducing mortality in reef fish due to barotrauma -- which is the buildup of gases in their bodies when brought up to the water's surface, that then makes it difficult for them to swim back down to their habitat after they're released. Fish that can't swim back down can become easy prey for predators. Those that are able to return to their habitat, can have long-term negative health effects. If successful, the project will lead to more fish surviving after being caught and released -- helping improve the overall health of reef fish fisheries and improving anglers' experiences.



It has a large geographic scope -- the project is intended to reach the entire Gulf, from the Florida Keys to Port Isabel, Texas. The first phases are focusing in Alabama and the Florida panhandle areas. The project has three major components.

The first is outreach and education -- increasing angler awareness and education of better fish handling practices -- as well as the distribution of descender devices. The second is to monitor the effectiveness of the restoration project, to make sure awareness and education are helping more fish survive. The last is to understand more precise estimates of post-release mortality for reef fish, and to use that information to improve the project.

Currently, we're still in early stages of project planning. We have spent this past calendar year developing and formalizing key partnerships for successful implementation. As of August, we now have cooperative agreements with the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission and more recently with Florida Sea Grant. The Commission has just recently published a request for proposal to get more precise estimates of discard mortality for reef fish. Responses are due November 30, 2020.

Another RFP to help understand attitudes and opinions of fish handling practices in the Gulf is forthcoming. Substantial effort is underway to closely coordinate with state management agencies to cooperate on recreational fisheries monitoring. These both can be found on the Gulf Commission's website, <https://www.gsmfc.org/>. Florida Sea Grant will begin work developing the project communications plans and educational material. We look forward to continued work this year, further developing project and communications strategies. By this time next year, we hope to be working with the for-hire angling community providing devices and educational and outreach materials.

Slide 19: For more information- [Website](#), [Interactive Map](#)

Next, Ron Howard with the U.S. Department of Agriculture will provide an overview of how you can find more information about the Open Ocean TIG's projects and activities.

Slide 20: [Where to Find More Information](#)

The Deepwater Horizon Trustee Council website, which is [gullspillrestoration.noaa.gov](http://gullspillrestoration.noaa.gov), serves as the primary source of information for Deepwater Horizon NRDA restoration information. Here you'll find the latest updates on planning for all of the restoration areas, a portal to submit project ideas, progress reports on ongoing projects, restoration plans, and more.

Slide 21: [How to Access Open Ocean Project Information](#)

Also from the home page, in the "Projects Near You" box, you can click the "View Project Details" button, shown here with the green arrow, to explore our interactive map to see details on restoration projects. This tool provides a map of all the projects approved by the NRDA Trustees and allows you to search by Restoration Area and open or download project data. Once you locate a project you would like to read more about, you can select it to easily access

project specific information. This includes project progress reports, budgets, and project monitoring and adaptive management plans.

#### Slide 22: Questions Introduction

I'll now turn you back over to Stephen Heverly with NOAA to guide us through the questions and answers portion of the meeting.

#### Slide 23: Questions and Answers

Thanks, Ron

Ok. We've been collecting your questions along the way and we're going to paraphrase some of them, or combine similar themes to try to answer as many questions as possible.

Remember, if you still have a question at this point, you can plug it into the "Questions" box at the bottom of the GoToWebinar control panel (where the green and blue arrow is pointing on this slide).

And if you didn't do it earlier, click on the link under the "handouts" tab for a PDF Open Ocean Restoration Area fact sheet to help you follow along. There are a lot of projects we talked about today. This fact sheet has a summary of recent activities, and the names of all the Open Ocean restoration and monitoring projects.

We'll take a few minutes to give you time to enter any additional questions before we begin. Next, we'll pass them on to someone on our team that can best respond, and they'll provide an answer if they can. We may not get to all of the questions, but we'll try to get to as many as possible.

[See Question and Answer Summary for Q&A portion of the webinar]

Next: Gale Bonanno with U.S. EPA will provide some closing remarks.

#### Slide 24: Thank you

Thank you for your time and interest in Open Ocean Restoration. We'll post the presentation and written transcript from today's webinar to the Trustee's website. To find the meeting materials, please go to [gulfspillrestoration.noaa.gov](http://gulfspillrestoration.noaa.gov), and click on the Open Ocean icon, which is shown in the upper right of this slide. Finally, if you're not signed up for our email blasts, please consider signing up.

Aside from visiting the website, it's the best way to stay up to date on all of the Deepwater Horizon NRDA restoration activities. You can easily do that on our home page by scrolling down to the green boxes and clicking the 'sign up now' button. We'll now conclude our annual meeting webinar. Thank you all very much for participating.

