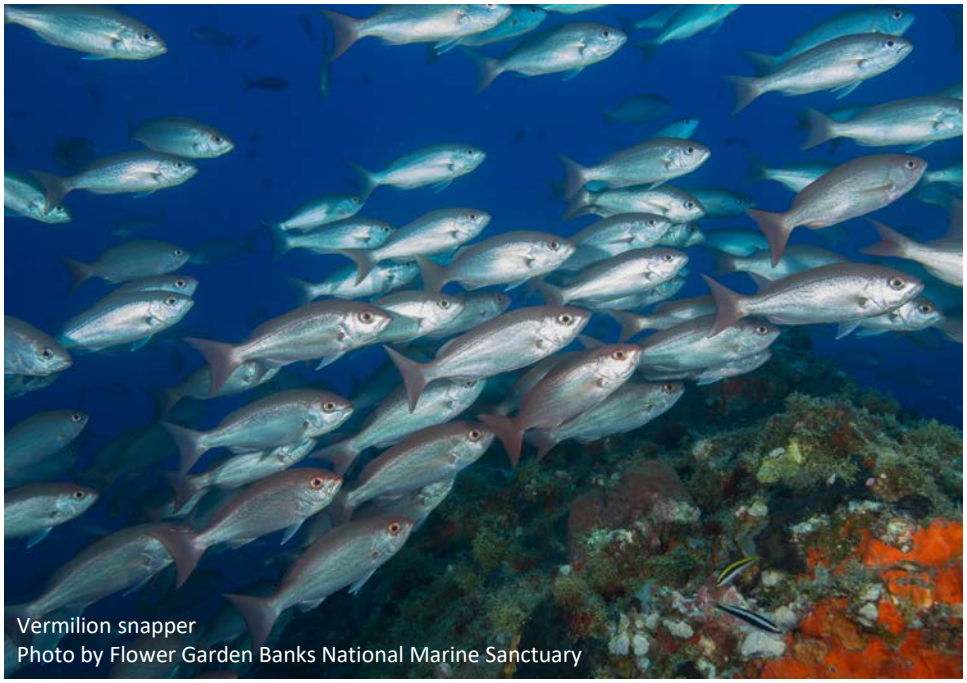
OPEN OCEAN TRUSTEE IMPLEMENTATION GROUP
Draft Restoration Plan 4/Environmental Assessment



Vermilion snapper
Photo by Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary

The Open Ocean TIG comprises the four federal DWH Trustee agencies:

- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
- U.S. Department of the Interior
- U.S. Department of Agriculture
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

THE *DEEPWATER HORIZON* OIL SPILL

On April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon (DWH) mobile drilling unit exploded and eventually sank in the Gulf of Mexico, resulting in a massive release of oil and natural gas. This release caused extensive natural resource injuries across the northern Gulf. Under the authority of the Oil Pollution Act (OPA), a council of federal and state Trustees was established to conduct a Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA), which includes assessing natural resource injuries resulting from the incident and working to make the environment and public whole for those injuries.

In accordance with OPA NRDA regulations, in 2016, the DWH Trustees issued a programmatic restoration plan to fund and implement restoration projects through a comprehensive, integrated, ecosystem approach. This programmatic restoration plan sets forth the process for DWH restoration planning and establishes a distributed governance structure that assigns a Trustee Implementation Group (TIG) for eight Restoration Areas. The Open Ocean TIG is responsible for restoration planning in the Open Ocean Restoration Area.

OPEN OCEAN RESTORATION

The Open Ocean TIG addresses a wide range of injured resources that use the open ocean, including water column and oceanic bottom fish and invertebrates, sea turtles, birds, marine mammals, sturgeon, and deep-sea corals. Many species that spend part of their lives in the Gulf of Mexico also migrate to other places—as far away as Canada and the Mediterranean Sea. The Open Ocean TIG will address these species throughout their life stages and geographic ranges, including restoration in offshore, coastal, and inland areas, and outside of the Gulf of Mexico.

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RESTORATION PLAN 4 AND ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

In June 2023, the Open Ocean TIG began developing its fourth restoration plan by requesting restoration project ideas from the public. The TIG narrowed the list of project ideas received to seven fish and water column invertebrate and five sea turtle restoration projects and no action alternatives that are evaluated in the draft restoration plan. Based on the evaluation, the Open Ocean TIG is proposing six fish and water column invertebrate and four sea turtle alternatives for implementation.

Loggerhead sea turtle
Photo by Tom Moore, NOAA Fisheries

PUBLIC REVIEW AND COMMENT

In accordance with the OPA NRDA regulations and the National Environmental Policy Act, members of the public are encouraged to review and comment on the draft restoration plan. The plan is available for 45 days following public notification in the *Federal Register*. After the close of the comment period, the Open Ocean TIG will consider all comments received and finalize the restoration plan. A summary of comments received and the TIG's responses, where applicable, will be included in the final restoration plan.

Public comments can be submitted through one of the following methods.

- Online. https://parkplanning.nps.gov/OOTIGRP4
- By mail.

  U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Gulf Restoration Office
  1875 Century Blvd.
  Atlanta, GA 30345
- During the public webinars. The Open Ocean TIG will also hold two public webinars to facilitate the public review and comment process. The webinar dates, times, and registration links are as follows:

  Thursday, November 14, 2024, from 1 to 2 pm Eastern. Register at: https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/7244601192809206361

  Wednesday, November 20, 2024, from 5 to 6 pm Eastern. Register at: https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/7473782296991218265

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION
www.gulfspillrestoration.noaa.gov/restoration-areas/open-ocean

Fish and Water Column Invertebrates

PROJECT NAME	PROJECT SUMMARY	EST. COST AND TIMEFRAME
Return 'Em Right Species and Area Expansion (Reduction of Postrelease Mortality from Barotrauma in Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Recreational Fisheries) (preferred)	This project would reduce sources of mortality for priority injured fish species by advancing use and adoption of best release practices. Such practices include the use of appropriate hooks, tackle, and landing tools and minimizing fight time to reduce mortality associated with regulatory discards, catch-and-release fishing, barotrauma, and depredation.	$66,220,000 15 years
Next Generation Fishing (preferred)	This project would restore priority injured fish species by implementing strategies to reduce bycatch or prevent the increase of bycatch in commercial fishing fleets that target fish with connectivity to injured populations. Fishing communities would be provided with methodologies and incentives to reduce bycatch mortality to fishery resources.	$57,200,000 15 years
Communication Networks and Mapping Tools to Reduce Fish Mortality (preferred)	This project would reduce bycatch, depredation, and disruption of spawning aggregations for priority injured fish species through the collection and sharing of data, development of models, and advancement of communication networks for commercial and recreational fisheries.	$18,040,000 8 years
Reduction of Diverse Threats to Fish and Water Column Invertebrates (preferred)	This project would restore injured fish and invertebrate species by implementing a range of activities to address environmental threats. Activities would include developing partnerships to design and implement conservation actions to address marine debris, invasive species, changes in water quality, and energy development and production activities.	$14,300,000 10 years
Education and Stewardship Partnerships with Charter Anglers (preferred)	This project would restore priority injured fish species by reducing sources of mortality from illegal charter fishing. Activities would include the development of a communications plan, conducting outreach and education on the impacts of illegal charter fishing, and evaluating rates of change in legal fishing effort following project outreach.	$3,000,000 8 years
Communication, Adaptive Management, Planning, and Integration (preferred)	This project would improve the effectiveness of restoration projects that benefit fish and water column resources by increasing understanding of resource distribution and dynamics, facilitating coordination among restoration practitioners, and expanding outreach to fishing communities to raise awareness of and engagement with ongoing restoration activities.	$23,260,000 15 years
Reduction in Fish Post-release Mortality from Depredation (non-preferred)	This project would reduce the risk of depredation of priority injured fish species in commercial and recreational fisheries by working cooperatively with fishing communities and other partners to test and implement depredation reduction strategies and improve understanding of fish depredation.	$5,052,000 10 years

Sea Turtles

PROJECT NAME	PROJECT SUMMARY	EST. COST AND TIMEFRAME
Sea Turtle Nesting Habitat Protection Expansion in Florida (Long Term Nesting Habitat Protection for Sea Turtles) (preferred)	This project would prevent the loss of high-density sea turtle nesting habitat by conserving nesting beach habitat in perpetuity through land acquisition. This project would build on the Open Ocean Trustees' *Long Term Nesting Habitat Protection for Sea Turtles* project, continuing current acquisition efforts at Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and expanding acquisition efforts to Nathaniel P. Reed Hobe Sound NWR.	$5,000,000 6 years
Gulf-Wide Sea Turtle Bycatch Reduction (preferred)	This project would reduce the risk of commercial fishery interactions with sea turtles through outreach, education, and alternative fishing gear distribution to Gulf of Mexico commercial fishing communities. This project would build on Regionwide Trustee (*Sea Turtle Early Restoration Project, Shrimp Trawl Bycatch Reduction Component*) and Open Ocean Trustee (*Reducing Juvenile Sea Turtle Bycatch through Development of Reduced Bar Spacing in Turtle Excluder Devices*) projects, continuing existing, successful efforts to reduce sea turtle bycatch in Gulf of Mexico commercial fisheries.	$8,500,000 8 years
Gulf-Wide Sea Turtle Vessel Strike Reduction (preferred)	This project would reduce the risk of boat strikes to sea turtles by taking a phased approach to identify hotspots of boat and sea turtle interactions, determine key risk factors, and implement voluntary, site-specific measures and boater outreach and education. Voluntary conservation measures would be implemented at three or more hotspot locations.	$3,500,000 8 years
Gulf-Wide Sea Turtle Stranding Network and Emergency Response Enhancements (preferred)	This project would improve capacity to identify and monitor in-water threats to and support response and rehabilitation for sea turtles during emergency events. This project would build on existing efforts from Early Restoration Phase IV (*Sea Turtle Early Restoration, Enhancement of the Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network and Development of an Emergency Response Program Component*) to maintain enhanced stranding network capabilities across the Gulf of Mexico.	$11,000,000 8 years
Kemp's Ridley Nesting Enhancement in Mexico (non-preferred)	This project would reduce hatchling mortality for Kemp's ridley sea turtles at nesting beaches in Mexico. This project would build on Kemp's ridley nest protection efforts in Mexico funded through the Early Restoration Phase IV *Sea Turtle Early Restoration Project, Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle Nest Detection Component* and the Regionwide Trustees' *Restore and Enhance Sea Turtle Nest Productivity project*.	$5,520,000 10 years