



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



Vermilion snapper
Photo by Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary

THE DEEPWATER HORIZON OIL SPILL

On April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon (DWH) mobile drilling unit exploded and eventually sank in the Gulf of America ("the Gulf"), 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.

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

OPEN OCEAN RESTORATION

The Open Ocean TIG addresses a wide range of injured resources that use the open ocean, including oceanic fish and water column invertebrates, sea turtles, birds, marine mammals, sturgeon, and deep-sea corals. Many species that spend part of their lives in the Gulf 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.



Final Restoration Plan 4/Environmental Assessment

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, five sea turtle restoration projects, and two no action alternatives that were evaluated in the draft restoration plan. In the final restoration plan, the Open Ocean TIG selected six fish and water column invertebrate and four sea turtle alternatives for funding and implementation.

The final restoration plan is available at www.gulfspillrestoration.noaa.gov/restoration-areas/open-ocean.



Loggerhead sea turtle
Photo by Tom Moore

PUBLIC REVIEW AND COMMENT

The TIG released the draft restoration plan for public review and comment on October 30, 2024, and accepted comments through December 16, 2024. Nineteen comments were received on the draft restoration plan. The TIG considered the public comments received, which informed the analysis of alternatives. Appendix G of the final restoration plan summarizes the public comments received and the TIG's responses to those comments. Comments included:

- Statements of support for the draft plan and the preferred and non-preferred alternatives.
- Recommendations for restoration activities.
- Comments about the monitoring and adaptive management process.
- Comments about public engagement.
- Comments on the budget for *Return 'Em Right: Species and Area Expansion*.
- Comments on data collection activities for *Next Generation Fishing and Communication Networks and Mapping Tools to Reduce Fish Mortality*.
- Recommendations for activities the TIG should consider for the *Reduction of Stressors to Fish and Water Column Invertebrates*.
- A comment regarding the budget and scope for the *Sea Turtle Vessel Strike Reduction* project.
- A comment recommending the prioritization of funding for sea turtle rescue organizations.
- A comment in support of the non-preferred *Kemp's Ridely Nesting Enhancement in Mexico* alternative.

The TIG appreciates the thoughtful comments on and interest in the restoration plan.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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





Fish and Water Column Invertebrates – Selected Projects

PROJECT NAME	PROJECT SUMMARY	EST. COST AND TIMEFRAME
Return 'Em Right: Species and Area Expansion	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	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	This project would reduce bycatch, depredation, and disturbance of spawning aggregations for priority injured fish species through the collection and sharing of data, development of models, and advancement of voluntary communication networks for commercial and recreational fisheries.	\$18,040,000 8 years
Reduction of Stressors to Fish and Water Column Invertebrates	This project would restore injured fish and invertebrate species by implementing a range of activities to address environmental stressors. Activities would include developing partnerships to design and implement conservation actions to address marine debris, invasive species, changes in water quality, and to improve understanding of other potential stressors to fish and water column invertebrates.	\$14,600,000 10 years
Education and Stewardship Partnerships with Charter Anglers	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	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



Sea Turtles – Selected Projects

PROJECT NAME	PROJECT SUMMARY	EST. COST AND TIMEFRAME
Sea Turtle Nesting Habitat Protection Expansion in Florida (Long Term Nesting Habitat Protection for Sea Turtles)	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' <i>Long Term Nesting Habitat Protection for Sea Turtles</i> 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
Sea Turtle Bycatch Reduction	This project would reduce the risk of commercial fishery interactions with sea turtles through outreach, education, and alternative fishing gear distribution to Gulf commercial fishing communities. This project would build on Regionwide Trustee (<i>Sea Turtle Early Restoration Project, Shrimp Trawl Bycatch Reduction Component</i>) and Open Ocean Trustee (<i>Reducing Juvenile Sea Turtle Bycatch through Development of Reduced Bar Spacing in Turtle Excluder Devices</i>) projects by continuing existing, successful efforts to reduce sea turtle bycatch in Gulf commercial fisheries.	\$8,800,000 11 years
Sea Turtle Vessel Strike Reduction	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
Sea Turtle Stranding Network and Emergency Response Enhancements	This project would improve capacity to identify and monitor in-water stressors to and support response and rehabilitation for sea turtles during emergency events. This project would build on existing efforts from Early Restoration Phase IV (<i>Sea Turtle Early Restoration, Enhancement of the Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network and Development of an Emergency Response Program Component</i>) to maintain enhanced stranding network capabilities across the Gulf.	\$11,000,000 8 years

