Open Ocean Restoration Area

June 2024

RECENT ACTIVITIES

In the past year, we continued to implement 32 restoration projects and 10 monitoring activities. Working with partners, our projects are conserving important habitats, reducing threats, such as bycatch, that can cause mortality, and filling critical information gaps to restore Open Ocean resources. We released our third final restoration plan to help restore for injuries to seabirds. We also requested sea turtle and fish and water column invertebrate restoration project ideas for our next restoration plan. Through our 2023 annual virtual public meeting, we shared updates on Open Ocean restoration planning and implementation. We also held our second annual mesophotic and deep benthic communities public webinar to share results and upcoming restoration activities for our deep-sea restoration projects.

WHAT WE DO

We are working to restore wide-ranging and migratory species throughout their life stages and geographic ranges, including inland, coastal, and offshore areas. Therefore, we may fund some restoration projects outside of the Gulf of Mexico. We coordinate with state trustees, especially when proposed projects overlap their jurisdictions.

The Trustee representatives for the Open Ocean Restoration Area are:

- Erin Chandler, U.S. Department of the Interior
- Laurie Rounds, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
- Ron Howard, U.S. Department of Agriculture
- Gale Bonanno, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Restoration Overview

$414 million committed to 42 approved projects

RECENT NEWS // RESTORATION PLAN 3 AND ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT: BIRDS

Following the final release of our third restoration plan in September 2023, the Open Ocean Trustees have continued to work together with our many partners to implement the seven approved seabird projects. We expect this exciting work to begin in 2024. The first project taking flight in 2024 will be the "Seabird Bycatch Reduction in Northeast U.S. and Atlantic Canada Fisheries" project, which is co-implemented by the Department of the Interior and NOAA.

The plan and its projects, totaling nearly $33 million, represent the largest commitment to date of *Deepwater Horizon* Natural Resource Damage Assessment funds for restoring injured seabird species, and includes restoration actions in Canada, the northeastern United States, and the Caribbean.

MAM ACTIVITIES

The Open Ocean Trustees are conducting several new Monitoring and Adaptive Management Activities that will help evaluate the ecosystem-level impact of our restoration work. We developed a draft conceptual model that will help assess what we know about how potential restoration actions will benefit natural resources. We are also developing a framework to evaluate benefits of restoration actions to marine mammals and sea turtles, which are difficult to monitor given how far individuals move.

A mapping project is underway to examine the overlap between open ocean resources and threats. This analysis will help identify locations where threat reduction projects may benefit the most species. We will use U.S. Environmental Protection Agency protocols in conjunction with fisheries population and food web sampling to evaluate the ecological effects of coastal restoration projects on fish and water column invertebrate species that rely on estuaries for part of their life cycle. Offshore, the Open Ocean Trustees will collect and analyze data to assess benefits to oceanic resources from restoring deep-sea habitats.

Restoration Overview Continued

RECENT NEWS // COMMON LOON PROJECT

The first Open Ocean TIG restoration plan included a project to restore common loons injured in the Gulf of Mexico. During nesting season, common loons migrate to the northern U.S to nest. Implementation of the Restoration of Common Loons in Minnesota project began in late 2019. Project oversight and management is overseen by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Gulf Restoration Office (GRO) and Green Bay Ecological Services Field Office (GBFO). The U.S. Geological Survey Upper Midwest Environmental Sciences Center (UMESC) oversees monitoring and adaptive management activities including developing survey protocols, data collection and analysis and report writing.

Our partner, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR), implements restoration activities including 1) acquiring loon breeding habitat; 2) providing artificial nesting platforms where appropriate and engaging Minnesota lake associations in loon conservation. Reducing loon exposure to lead-based fishing tackle is implemented through the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) "Get the Lead Out" program. In 2023, the project deployed 42 Artificial Nesting Platforms, pursued two loon habitat parcels for acquisition, conducted loon surveys, and recruited 21 lake associations. In addition, MPCA staff attended 111 in-person events, reaching approximately 10,750+ people, recruited 113 “Get the Lead Out” partners, and distributed approximately 850 lead collection kits, all the while continuing to implement the Lead-Free Tackle Rebate Program.

Funding Overview

Restoration Type	Settlement Allocation	Funds Committed Through May 2024	Percent Funds Committed	Percent Funds Remaining
Fish and Water Column Invertebrates	$400,000,000	$80,203,312	20%	80%
Sturgeon	$15,000,000	$3,055,220	20%	80%
Sea Turtles	$55,000,000	$20,858,902	38%	62%
Marine Mammals	$55,000,000	$23,501,256	43%	57%
Birds	$70,000,000	$48,864,465	70%	30%
Mesophotic and Deep Benthic Communities	$273,300,000	$126,816,161	46%	54%
Provide and Enhance Recreational Opportunities	$22,397,916	$22,388,991	100%	0%
Monitoring and Adaptive Management	$200,000,000	$22,698,392	11%	89%
Administrative Oversight and Comprehensive Planning	$150,000,000	$65,903,253	44%	56%
Total	$1,240,697,916	$414,289,951	33%	67%

The Trustees reviewed over 80 project ideas submitted for sea turtles and oceanic fish and invertebrates. We are taking the best of those ideas and developing restoration alternatives for public comment. Stay tuned for information about how you can provide input.

MORE INFORMATION IS AVAILABLE ONLINE
www.gulfspillrestoration.noaa.gov/restoration-areas/open-ocean