

Florida Gulf Ecosystem Priorities for the RESTORE Act

The Gulf Coast is one of the most biologically rich places on Earth. The RESTORE Act creates a mechanism to harness penalties from the Deepwater Horizon disaster to benefit this special place with a balance of ecosystem restoration and appropriate economic projects.

Audubon Florida, working in concert with other Gulf state Audubon offices, Gulf Audubon chapters and allied conservation organizations, proposes a science-driven set of priority projects that are likely to have the greatest ecological impact on the entire Gulf coast and especially Florida's vulnerable coastal areas.

Florida has an important legacy of ecological planning efforts available to inform restoration of the Gulf of Mexico and its bird populations.

In Florida, our ecology IS our economy, and we know that the integrity of the Gulf and its habitats supports our economic well-being.



St. Joseph Peninsula by Daniel Ewert

Audubon is particularly focused on projects and ongoing programs that will help secure the future of waterbirds, seabirds and shorebirds in the Gulf.

Birds, including the iconic brown pelican, were especially hard hit during and after the oil spill.

Yet issues that threaten these species relate to a larger range of challenges and solutions:

Challenges	Solutions
- Habitat loss due to development, erosion, sea level rise, and increased storm intensity. - Pollution, including oil spills, sewage and excess nutrients - Human disturbance of wildlife and habitat - Disproportionately high predation rates, related especially to feral exotic species and human-amplified populations of native species	- Preserving and restoring the watershed upon which coastal habitats depend - Restoring and creating additional coastal habitat for bird population expansion and shifts - Protecting key sites from degradation and human disturbance - Providing incentives and education for better management by public and private land managers - Continuing and expanding data collection and analysis to inform adaptive management

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To help conserve and restore Gulf habitats and the wildlife that depend on a healthy Gulf, Audubon Florida recommends projects and programs organized in the following way:

1. Watershed scale land conservation to protect and improve freshwater flowing to the Gulf and estuaries
2. Strategic habitat conservation critical to the survival of coastal bird species
3. Habitat restoration to improve conditions for fish, wildlife and people including improving freshwater flows to special places such as the Everglades and its estuaries.
4. Ongoing resource management and monitoring to make sure that wildlife habitat conservation projects succeed.

In putting forth these recommendations, Audubon Florida envisions more than a series of isolated efforts.

We call on decision-makers including the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council to treat the coastal Gulf of Mexico as a single ecosystem. Accordingly, Audubon Florida recommends that projects and programs work together across political and jurisdictional boundaries.

Watershed-Scale Land Conservation

The Florida Forever planning and ranking process was established by the Florida Legislature. The Florida Forever list contains carefully planned projects pre-approved by the Florida Cabinet that can help secure the integrity of Florida's coasts.

In addition to protecting wildlife, habitat and water quality, these places support vibrant resource-based economies and buffer military operations which are of substantial importance to the economies of Florida's impacted counties.

Florida Forever Projects that could benefit the Gulf of Mexico (by County):

Bay	Bear Creek Forest (also Calhoun and Gulf)
Bay	St. Joe Timberland (also Franklin, Gulf, Jefferson, Taylor, Wakulla, Walton and 4 others)
Bay	West Bay Preservation area
Charlotte	Charlotte Harbor Estuary (also Lee and Sarasota)
Charlotte	Charlotte Harbor Flatwoods (also Lee)
Charlotte	Hall Ranch
Citrus	Annutelliga Hammock
Citrus	Florida Springs Coastal Greenway
Citrus	Rainbow River Corridor (also Marion)
Collier	Belle Meade
Collier	Save Our Everglades
Desoto	Peace River Refuge
Dixie	Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed
Escambia	Lower Perdido River Buffer
Escambia	Perdido Pitcher Plant Prairie
Gadsden	Neal Land & Timber Apalachicola River Corridor (also Liberty and Calhoun)
Gadsden	Ochlockonee River Conservation Area (also Leon)
Jackson	Middle Chipola River (also Calhoun)
Jackson	Apalachicola River (also Gadsden, Liberty and Calhoun)
Jefferson	Wacissa/Aucilla River Sinks
Jefferson	West Aucilla River Buffer
Lee	Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed (also Collier)
Lee	Estero Bay

Leon	Ayavalla Plantation
Levy	Caber Coastal Connector
Levy	Gulf Hammock
Manatee	Terra Ceia
Monroe	Coupon Bight/Key Deer
Monroe	Florida Keys Ecosystem
Monroe	North Key Largo Hammocks
Okaloosa	Shoal River Buffer
Pasco	Cross Bar/Al Bar Ranch
Pasco	Green Swamp- Withlacoochee River Headwaters (also Lake and Polk)
Polk	Green Swamp- Peace River Headwaters
Santa Rosa	Clear Creek/Whiting Field
Santa Rosa	Garcon Ecosystem
Santa Rosa	Wolfe Creek Forest
Sarasota	Myakka Ranchlands
Taylor	San Pedro Bay (also Madison)
Wakulla	Dickerson Bay/Bald Point (also Franklin)
Wakulla	Upper Saint Marks River Corridor (also Leon & Jefferson)
Wakulla	Wakulla Springs Protection Zone (also Leon)
Washington	Sand Mountain Econfina Creek Watershed (also Bay)
Walton	Seven Runs Creek
Walton	South Walton County Ecosystem
Walton	Upper Shoal River



Watershed-Scale Land Conservation

Additions, Inholdings or Complements to Federal Lands

St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge

1. **St. Vincent Sound to Lake Wimico Ecosystem** (Gulf and Franklin counties): The 40,000 acres south of Lake Wimico known as the St. Vincent Sound to Lake Wimico Ecosystem would afford water quality and quantity benefits to the Lake, as well as Apalachicola and St. Joseph bays and St. Vincent Sound.

St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge

In addition to the Upper St. Marks River Corridor Florida Forever project, there are an additional four tracts that would help protect the Refuge and Apalachee Bay watershed:

1. **Sam Shine Tract** (Wakulla County) 8,117 acres
2. **Five Smooth Stones Tract** (Wakulla County) 930-acre easement
3. **JLT Tract** (Wakulla County) 1,230-acre easement
4. **The Nature Conservancy Tract** (Jefferson and Wakulla Counties), 7,699 acres

Strategic River & Bay Watersheds – Department of Defense Northwest Florida Coastal Base Missions

1. **Knight Family Trust Choctawhatchee River and Bay Watershed** (Washington County): This proposed 40,000-acre easement would complete the riparian public lands conservation corridor from Alabama to Choctawhatchee Bay, and preserve sandhill aquifer recharge areas feeding springs and major creek headwaters for both Choctawhatchee & St. Andrews Bays.

Strategic Habitat for Survival of Coastal Birdlife

A handful of private coastal sites are of vital importance to imperiled beach-dependent bird species. Securing the

following sites from willing sellers will help survival of birds and other wildlife:

1. **Big Sabine, Escambia County:** This University of West Florida inholding in Gulf Islands National Seashore on Santa Rosa Island has been proposed for development in the last year. Its high quality habitats would be better and more economically managed if conveyed or acquired and added to the National Seashore.
2. **Shell Island, Bay County:** Much of this barrier island is held by Tyndall Air Force Base and St. Andrews State Park, and is of vital importance to nesting, beach-dependent birds, especially state threatened Snowy Plovers. Platted but undeveloped lots present challenges to management of the island; their acquisition would help make management more economical and effective.
3. **Smith Island, Wakulla County:** This private inholding in St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge hosts substantial numbers of breeding pelicans and other waterbirds. Acquisition and conveyance to the National Wildlife Refuge would ensure its future for these species.
4. **Hunter Property, Pinellas County:** Acquisition of this private parcel on the southern boundary of Caladesi Island State Park would help buffer the park and its beach-nesting birds from use to the south.

Habitat Restoration Projects

1. **Alafia Banks Restoration, Hillsborough County:** Storms and ship wakes have eroded these waterbird rookery islands in Hillsborough Bay, jeopardizing habitat for the sanctuary's thousands of nesting pairs of 18 waterbird species. While 1,675 feet of erosion control structures have already been installed, another 5,125 feet are needed to protect this Globally Important Bird Area.
2. **Greater Tampa Bay Rookery Island Restorations, Hillsborough, Pinellas and Manatee counties:** A total of 3,250 feet of reef balls and/or wave attenuation devices

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es are needed to stave off the catastrophic erosion of the following waterbird rookeries in West Central Florida: Dogleg Key, Sand Key Dune on West Bird Island, Dot Dash Bird Islands and Cortez Key Bird Sanctuary.

3. **C-43 Caloosahatchee Storage Reservoir, Hendry and Lee counties:** When Lake Okeechobee reaches high levels, large pulses of nutrient-rich freshwater are released to the east and west of the Lake and out to coastal estuaries, often resulting in a drought during dry years because of lack of storage capacity. This reservoir will provide storage in wet years to prevent discharges and a source of water during droughts or to be released during disasters. The project will benefit this Gulf estuary that is home to nearly 40% of Florida's rare, threatened and endangered species.
4. **Tamiami Trail Next Steps project, Miami-Dade County:** Bridging Tamiami Trail will remove the barriers to sheet flow that have dissected Sharkriver Slough. This slough historically began north of Tamiami Trail and continued all the way to the 10,000 islands region along the Gulf coast. Reconnecting this natural pattern and hydrating this region of the Gulf coast will prevent further salt water intrusion and improve habitat in this mangrove labyrinth.
5. **Cape Sable Canal Filling, Monroe County:** Canals dredged through Cape Sable expose interior marshes and lakes to incoming Florida Bay and Gulf of Mexico tides that push marine waters inland, increasing salinity and reducing ecological productivity. Outgoing tides drain freshwater from marshes and transport sediments toward Lake Ingraham, resulting in a substantial loss of coastal habitat. Plugging House Ditch, Slagle's Ditch and the Raulerson Brothers Canal will restrict tidal flow into the interior marsh, protecting it from further erosion and improving habitat conditions.

Resource Monitoring and Management

1. **Coastal Bird Perpetual Management Fund (Gulf-wide):** The establishment of a coastal bird adaptive manage-

ment investment trust fund, along with an accepted safe withdrawal rate, will provide long-term support for conservation strategies critical to long-term recovery of coastal bird populations. These include robust survey and monitoring efforts, posting nesting areas, predator control, and stewarding efforts to reduce disturbance. An investment trust fund of \$150-\$175M Gulf-wide could provide \$4.5-\$7M annually to supplement ongoing management and monitoring efforts.

2. **Panhandle Watershed Monitoring:** While the bays of Florida's peninsular Gulf Coast have the benefit of National Estuary Programs to monitor their health and coordinate restoration, the bays of the Panhandle have less coordinated support. As a result, volunteer partnerships have emerged around the Pensacola Bay, Choctawhatchee, St. Andrews and Apalachicola basins, to monitor and safeguard watershed health. Funding support for long-term, coordinated and professionalized monitoring is essential to not only measure restoration progress, but determine the baselines still lacking for many Panhandle waters.

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