Open Ocean Restoration Area 2023 Annual Meeting Script and Q&A

October 19, 2023 Webinar

Slide 1: Open Ocean Restoration Area Annual Meeting
Speaker: Lena Flannery, IEc

Thank you everyone for joining today's Open Ocean Trustee Implementation Group webinar. I'm Lena Flannery, a contractor with the Trustees. I'm helping facilitate the webinar today.

Before we get started, please fill out this poll so we can learn more about who is joining us today.

Thanks for those responses, we're excited to have folks from so many different backgrounds with us today. Ok, let's get started.

Message in the chat: Welcome to the OO TIG Annual Meeting. We will get started shortly.

Slide 2: Webinar Participation
Speaker: Lena Flannery, IEc

Before we begin the presentations, I'd like to quickly run through some webinar logistics. You should be able to see the control panel on the right-hand side of your screen, which is shown on this slide.

Note that only presenters will be heard during the webinar; all attendees will be muted.

Please also take a look at the "Questions" box at the bottom of the control panel, where the green 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. You will also have an opportunity to enter questions at the end of the presentation, but if you plug them in early, it can help us organize them ahead of time.

We'll also post the presentation slides and a transcript of the webinar to https://www.gulfspillrestoration.noaa.gov/ in a few days.

Now I'll turn it over to Danny Wiegand to go through our agenda for today.

Message in the chat: Open Ocean Restoration Area webpage: http://www.gulfspillrestoration.noaa.gov/restoration-areas/open-ocean/

Slide 3: Webinar Overview
Speaker: Danny Wiegand, US EPA

Thank you, Lena, and thank you everyone for joining today's Open Ocean Trustee Implementation Group webinar. I'm Danny Wiegand with the US Environmental Protection Agency.

We planned today's webinar to provide our annual update about restoration for the *Deepwater Horizon* Open Ocean Restoration Area. During the webinar, we'll share updates about our restoration progress,

including the recently approved Restoration Plan 3 for seabirds, planning efforts for our next restoration plan, and recently approved monitoring and adaptive management activities. We'll also have time to take your questions.

Slide 4: *Deepwater Horizon* Incident
Speaker: Danny Wiegand, US EPA

On April 20, 2010, the *Deepwater Horizon* oil rig exploded, caught fire, and sank, leading to the largest offshore marine oil spill in US history. Approximately 134 million gallons of oil were released into the deep ocean over nearly three months. Surface oil slicks covered more than 43,000 square miles of the Gulf of Mexico – an area roughly the size of the state of Virginia. The oil washed onshore, impacting at least 1,300 miles of shoreline habitats. The spill and associated response actions resulted in injuries to diverse species, habitats, resources, and ecological functions. Overall, injuries affected such a broad array of natural resources and ecological services, over such an expansive area, that they caused an ecosystem-level injury to the northern Gulf of Mexico.

Slide 5: Open Ocean Trustee Representatives
Speaker: Danny Wiegand, US EPA

I'd like to introduce the members of the Open Ocean Trustee Implementation Group, or Open Ocean TIG, which are shown on this slide. The Open Ocean TIG is one of seven Gulf of Mexico Restoration Areas established to conduct restoration for the *Deepwater Horizon* Natural Resource Damage Assessment. Four federal natural resource trustees – NOAA, USDA, EPA, and DOI – are the members of this TIG. We work together to restore wide-ranging and migratory species 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 6: *Deepwater Horizon* Restoration Goals
Speaker: Danny Wiegand, US EPA

The *Deepwater Horizon* Natural Resource Trustees are in the first decade of a multi-decade process to plan and implement a comprehensive programmatic restoration plan that includes five goals: (1) Restore and Conserve Habitat; (2) Replenish and Protect Living Coastal and Marine Resources; (3) Restore Water Quality; (4) Provide and Enhance Recreational Opportunities; and (5) Monitoring and Adaptive Management and Adaptive Management for Unknown Conditions.

Slide 7: Open Ocean Restoration Area Allocation
Speaker: Danny Wiegand, US EPA

In 2016, the Trustees reached a settlement resulting from the Natural Resource Damage Assessment process (abbreviated NRDA). The settlement resolved BP's liability for natural resource injuries caused by

the oil spill. Part of the settlement requires BP to pay up to $8.8 billion dollars over 15 years to federal and state trustees for the purposes of restoring injured natural resources and the services they provide. The Open Ocean Restoration Area was allocated $1.2 billion which, as shown by this doughnut chart, includes approximately $868 million (shown in green) to restore birds, sturgeon, oceanic fish and invertebrates, sea turtles, marine mammals, and deep-sea coral communities.

Slide 8: Open Ocean Funding Update
Speaker: Danny Wiegand, US EPA

The Open Ocean TIG has approved a total of 42 restoration projects and planning activities, committing approximately $412 million dollars out of the $606 million in settlement funds received from BP to date. We continue to conduct restoration planning to identify projects to help restore the Open Ocean resources injured by the oil spill and to fully allocate remaining settlement funds. Next, Laurie Rounds with NOAA will provide an update on our restoration projects.

Slide 9: Open Ocean Restoration Projects
Speaker: Laurie Rounds, NOAA

Thank you, Danny. I'm Laurie Rounds, NOAA's representative on the Open Ocean TIG.

As Danny mentioned, the Open Ocean TIG has approved a total of 42 projects: 34 restoration projects and 8 monitoring and adaptive management activities.

Five of our projects were selected prior to the settlement, during Early Restoration; of these, we completed two projects in 2019 to restore recreational uses on federal lands in Florida and Alabama. And we anticipate completing three more projects over the next year, the two remaining Recreational Enhancement projects and the Oceanic Fish Restoration project. Most of our projects, 21 restoration projects, were approved in 2019 with our first two restoration plans. Last month, we released our third final restoration plan, which approved an additional seven projects to restore birds, which you'll hear more about later in the presentation.

In 2019, we approved three monitoring projects. Two, focused on filling data gaps for Gulf sturgeon restoration, will be completing their work over the next year. The third activity is developing models to help us understand how stressors impact sperm whales and oceanic dolphins in the Gulf. It has begun phase two, which will include field studies to improve model predictions. In 2022 and 2023, we developed five additional monitoring activities focused on filling important data gaps for restoration planning and developing tools to evaluate restoration progress. You'll hear more about these new activities later in the presentation.

Next, I'd like to share a few highlights for some of our restoration projects. If you would like to learn more about the projects, please see our annual progress reports which were published this past June. We've shared a link to the reports in chat.

Message in the chat: Link to annual progress reports: https://www.gulfspillrestoration.noaa.gov/2023/05/2022-annual-reports-deepwater-horizon-trustees-invest-214-billion-313-projects-0

Slide 10: Open Ocean Restoration Highlights
Speaker: Laurie Rounds, NOAA

In our first restoration plan, we approved a project to restore common loons, which were injured while in the Gulf of Mexico. During nesting season, common loons migrate to the northern US to nest. Through the Common Loon Restoration Project, the Trustees and our local partner, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, built and placed 42 artificial nesting platforms in important loon nesting habitat to help boost their breeding success. Local community members, called Loon Liaisons, helped to place the nesting platforms on lakes in their communities and provide vital assistance with platform construction and surveys. Community lake associations are also involved in the project by monitoring the platforms to see if they are being used and whether any maintenance is needed. Through the Common Loon project, these community efforts are helping to restore this iconic water bird.

Habitat protection has also been a priority for black tern restoration. Over the last few years, the Black Tern Restoration Project has protected and enhanced over 6,800 acres of wetland and grassland habitat for black terns in North and South Dakota, where the terns nest before returning to the Gulf of Mexico during the winter. Through existing US Fish and Wildlife Service conservation programs, the project has been able to partner with private landowners who signed up to protect and enhance important black tern habitat on their property.

Slide 11: Open Ocean Restoration Highlights
Speaker: Laurie Rounds, NOAA

Our project to protect sea turtle nesting habitat has also been very successful. In collaboration with partners at The Conservation Fund and the State of Florida, the Open Ocean Trustees completed acquisition of two beachfront parcels totaling almost two acres in 2023. These parcels were acquired from willing property owners and will help protect habitat for beach nesting sea turtles in eastern Florida.

These two acquisitions are joined by a 400-foot beachfront habitat parcel that was acquired by the project in 2021. The parcels provide important connections with surrounding areas protected by the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge, the State of Florida, and two counties. Many sea turtles that range throughout the Gulf of Mexico nest at the refuge, which is home to the largest nesting population of loggerheads in the world and the largest nesting population of green sea turtles in the United States.

By protecting these habitat parcels, more than 2,600 feet of sea turtle nesting habitat are now protected from development and the negative effects of artificial lighting on nesting sea turtles and hatchlings. The properties will be managed for sea turtle nesting in perpetuity as part of the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge.

Slide 12: Open Ocean Restoration Highlights
Speaker: Laurie Rounds, NOAA

And last, I'd like to highlight our projects focused on better understanding and restoring the Gulf's deep-sea habitats. Last year the mesophotic and deep benthic communities restoration projects completed eight at-sea expeditions to support restoration. The 2023 season has also been successful, with eight more at-sea expeditions. Seven of these have already been completed, and the last mission will complete its work this month. This year the projects have been able to expand our ability to engage the public in these at-sea expeditions through online telepresence live broadcasts and community events. Through these outreach efforts, project partners have engaged more than 865 people, including Gulf educators, students, and over 160 underserved youth, to share the exciting marine science and technology used to better understand and restore deep sea habitats. We also developed an interactive Story Map where you can see where the locations and results of the expeditions. A link to the Story Map has been provided in chat.

Next, Erin Plitsch with the Department of the Interior will share updates on Restoration Plan 3.

Message in the chat: Mesophotic and Deep Benthic Community Expeditions Story Map: https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/908a2d2000894c2b8a6daafb8163a357

Slide 13: Restoration Planning and Projects
Speaker: Erin Plitsch, DOI

Thank you, Laurie, and thank you all for joining today. I'm Erin Plitsch and I represent the Department of the Interior on the Open Ocean TIG. I'll provide an update on Restoration Plan 3. As a reminder, you can enter your questions into the "Questions" box anytime, and we will put those into a queue to answer after the presentation.

Slide 14: Restoration Plan 3
Speaker: Erin Plitsch, DOI

Open Ocean Restoration Plan 3 was finalized and released to the public on September 15, 2023. Seven projects, totaling nearly $33 million dollars, were selected for implementation in Restoration Plan 3. These seven projects will benefit seabird species that were injured by the spill by improving nesting success at known breeding sites outside of the northern Gulf, and by reducing the risk of mortality resulting from bycatch in fisheries.

The plan and its projects 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.

Slide 15: Restoration Plan 3
Speaker: Erin Plitsch, DOI

The seven projects funded by Restoration Plan 3 are listed here. The seabird community using the Northern Gulf of Mexico is diverse and complex and comes from different breeding regions outside of the Gulf of Mexico. Restoration activities include enhancing seabird nesting success by managing predators and invasive mammals, improving nesting habitat by managing vegetation and removing marine debris, enhancing nesting colonies by attracting seabirds to suitable nesting areas, managing human disturbance, and preventing reintroduction of invasive species. We will also be developing voluntary, innovative strategies for commercial fishermen to reduce seabird bycatch.

Slide 16: Restoration Plan 3
Speaker: Erin Plitsch, DOI

This map shows the geographic range of Restoration Plan 3 projects in the Caribbean, and the icons represent the restoration activities taking place in each location. The projects in this region are intended to provide the greatest opportunity to benefit eight nesting seabird species that spend part of their lifecycles in the Gulf of Mexico: Audubon's shearwater, sooty tern, magnificent frigatebird, bridled tern, masked booby, brown noddy, white-tailed tropicbird, and brown booby.

Slide 17: Restoration Plan 3
Speaker: Erin Plitsch, DOI

This map shows the geographic range of Restoration Plan 3 projects in the Northeast region of North America, and again, the icons represent the restoration activities taking place in this region. Similarly to the projects in the Caribbean, the projects in this area are also intended to provide the greatest opportunity to benefit seabird species that spend time in both the Gulf and Northern geographies, including the common tern, northern gannet, and great shearwater.

Slide 18: Restoration Plan 3
Speaker: Erin Plitsch, DOI

Following the final release of RP3, the OO TIG Trustees will continue to work together with our many partners to implement the seven seabird projects, and we expect this exciting work to begin in 2024. And now I will hand it back to Laurie.

Slide 19: Restoration Plan 4
Speaker: Laurie Rounds, NOAA

Thank you, Erin. Next, I'll provide an update on planning to develop our fourth Restoration Plan. As a reminder, you can enter your questions into the "Questions" box anytime, and we will put those into a queue to answer after the presentation.

Slide 20: Public Participation in Restoration Planning
Speaker: Laurie Rounds, NOAA

The Open Ocean Trustees are continuing restoration planning to address injuries to oceanic resources from the oil spill. For our next restoration plan, we decided to focus on the Fish and Water Column Invertebrates and Sea Turtle restoration types. The *Deepwater Horizon* restoration planning process begins with a request for public input to help us identify restoration opportunities. So, in June, the Open Ocean TIG put out a call for restoration ideas, requesting submissions to the *Deepwater Horizon* project portal by August 14.

Slide 21: Fish and Water Column Invertebrates
Speaker: Laurie Rounds, NOAA

As part of the public notice, we identified priorities for each of the restoration types. For fish and water column invertebrates, our priorities mirrored those developed with stakeholders in the 2022 Fish and Water Column Invertebrates Restoration Strategy. These include priorities to address threats such as bycatch; illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing; marine debris; and post-release mortality in recreational fisheries. Our priorities also include developing tools and techniques for fishing communities to improve fishery health and sustainability.

Slide 22: Sea Turtles
Speaker: Laurie Rounds, NOAA

For sea turtles, the priorities in our notice focused on building on the successes from the sea turtle projects implemented for the Open Ocean restoration area and across the region, as well as priorities identified in the sea turtle strategic framework. Our priorities are improving capacity for responding to threats and emergency events, reducing the risk to sea turtles of vessel strikes, improving the use of sea turtle bycatch reduction devices, and conserving sea turtle nesting habitat.

Slide 23: Summary of Project Ideas Received
Speaker: Laurie Rounds, NOAA

I'd like to thank everyone that submitted restoration ideas to the *Deepwater Horizon* project portal. There were 83 submissions that proposed ideas for restoring our priority restoration types. After categorizing the projects, we identified 25 project ideas that proposed restoration for fish and water column invertebrates and 52 ideas for restoring sea turtles. There were also six ideas that focused on activities that would benefit both restoration types. Many of the ideas submitted targeted the priorities identified in the notice, but we also received ideas to address emerging issues and leverage other work in the Gulf. And some of the submitted ideas proposed restoring highly migratory fish and sea turtle species through international work in Mexico and the Caribbean.

Slide 24: Restoration Plan 4 Timeline
Speaker: Laurie Rounds, NOAA

The Trustees are screening the ideas that were submitted to identify projects that will best meet our restoration goals and that are consistent with the *Deepwater Horizon* programmatic restoration plan. The set of projects that are prioritized through screening, referred to as the reasonable range of alternatives for restoration, will be developed and evaluated in a draft restoration plan. We anticipate releasing the draft plan for public comment in the fall next year and will hold at least one public webinar.

If you have not already, please sign up to be notified when there are opportunities for public input on the draft restoration plan. We'll share information about how to do this later in the presentation. I will now pass it over to Eric Weissberger from NOAA to give an update on the Open Ocean TIG's MAM activities.

Slide 25: Monitoring and Adaptive Management
Speaker: Eric Weissberger, NOAA

Thank you, Laurie. I'm Eric Weissberger and I'm NOAA's representative on the Open Ocean TIG's Monitoring and Adaptive Management team. I'll provide an update on some recently approved monitoring and adaptive management activities. The implementation plans for these recently approved activities are available on the Open Ocean TIG webpage, and we'll provide a link in the chat. As a reminder, you can enter your questions into the "Questions" box anytime, and we will put those into a queue to answer after the presentation.

Message in the chat: https://www.gulfspillrestoration.noaa.gov/restoration-areas/open-ocean

Slide 26: Gulf-wide Status of Nesting Sea Turtles and Beaches Data Inventory
Speaker: Eric Weissberger, NOAA

The first MAM activity I'd like to talk about is the Gulf-Wide Status of Nesting Sea Turtles and Beaches Data Inventory. This activity was approved in February of 2023 and is expected to last for two years. The purpose of this project is to identify knowledge gaps related to the status of sea turtles at three life-history stages across the Gulf of Mexico: adult nesting females, incubating eggs, and hatchlings. The project will inventory and evaluate existing information for its use restoring sea turtles injured by the spill. The project will also make recommendations for future data needs. So far, the papers inventoried have dealt with Kemp's ridley and loggerhead turtles.

Slide 27: Conceptual Model to Inform Open Ocean Ecosystem Indicators
Speaker: Eric Weissberger, NOAA

The second monitoring and adaptive management activity is a conceptual model to inform open ocean ecosystem indicators. This activity was approved in December of 2022 and is expected to last for two years. The model will organize what is known and not known about how restoration affects resources

and habitats. The TIG will use this information to refine objectives and indicators and identify MAM needs.

We have a draft of the high-level conceptual model and are currently developing submodels for individual resources.

Slide 28: Analysis of Open Ocean Threats, Habitat Use, and Animal Movement
Speaker: Eric Weissberger, NOAA

The third MAM activity is the analysis of open ocean threats, habitat use, and animal movement. This activity was approved in February of 2023 and is expected to last two years. The project will synthesize available data on animal movement, habitats, and stressors to identify areas of overlap between natural resources and stressors. The map on this slide shows similar work that the Nature Conservancy did to identify areas where Gulf fish experience multiple threats. Areas in red indicate a high threat level. We plan to do a similar analysis focusing on the species and threats of interest to the Open Ocean TIG. This analysis will be used to plan threat reduction projects in places where multiple resources may benefit. The work may be repeated in the future to evaluate whether the overlap between natural resources and threats was reduced. Furthermore, this project will identify gaps in threats, animal movement, and habitat data.

Slide 29: Evaluation Framework for Sea Turtle and Marine Mammal Restoration
Speaker: Eric Weissberger, NOAA

The next MAM activity I'd like to tell you about is the evaluation framework for sea turtle and marine mammal restoration. This activity was approved in June of 2023 and is expected to last two and a half to three years. Determining the impact of our restoration work for these wide-ranging animals is difficult. Therefore, we are developing an evaluation framework that will compile data from marine mammal and sea turtle restoration projects and population assessments, as well as information related to stressors and environmental drivers. This will help with development of objectives and performance measures to evaluate restoration activities.

Next, a team of experts will work through this evaluation framework. Where data are available, they will use mathematical modeling and other quantitative methods. Where data are insufficient for quantitative analysis, expert elicitation will be used. The result of this analysis will be an initial evaluation of the benefits of Open Ocean TIG restoration.

The third step of the project will be identifying the key uncertainties in the models used in the evaluation framework and determining whether reducing these uncertainties will affect recommendations for future restoration actions.

This project will help us understand and report restoration benefits to the public, adaptively manage existing projects, and select new restoration projects. If this approach is successful, it could be extended to the marine mammal and turtle restoration activities in other TIGs or to other restoration types.

Slide 30: Vessel Surveys for Abundance and Distribution of Marine Mammals and Sea Birds
Speaker: Eric Weissberger, NOAA

Finally, I'd like to update date you on a previously approved MAM activity, Vessel Surveys for Abundance and Distribution of Marine Mammals and Sea Birds. This activity was approved in August of 2022 and is expected to last three years. This project was undertaken to facilitate restoration planning, as you need to know where animals are in order conduct restoration. During the first year of the survey there were approximately 400 sightings of 20 species of marine mammals and 3800 sightings of 22 species of seabirds. There were also several sightings of the rare Rice's whale, endemic to the Gulf of Mexico. We were happy to be able to put out regular blog posts while at sea to keep the public informed of this work. There's a link to the blog in the chat. After next year's surveys, scientists will update spatial density models and abundance estimates to help with restoration planning.

Next, Ben Battle with US Department of Agriculture will go over ways you can learn more about the Open Ocean projects.

Message in the chat: https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/science-blog/day-day-observations-and-acoustics-part-one

Slide 31: How to Access Open Ocean Project Information
Speaker: Ben Battle, USDA

Thank you, Eric. Hello everyone. I'm Ben Battle with the US Department of Agriculture. I'd like to go over some of the features of the Gulf Spill Restoration website and how you can get more information about the great restoration projects you heard about today. From the home page, in the "Projects Near You Box" you can click the "View Project Details" button, shown here with the purple arrow. Explore our interactive map to see details on restoration projects, using the link in the chat. This tool provides a map of all the projects approved by the 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. Project records include progress reports, budgets, and monitoring and adaptive management plans.

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.

Thank you for your attention. Next, we look forward to answering your questions. I'll turn it back over to Lena Flannery now.

Message in the chat: For reference, you can find information about our projects here: https://www.habitat.noaa.gov/storymap/dwh/?openOcean

Slide 32: Questions
Speaker: Lena Flannery, IEc

Thanks, Ben. Hello again, this is Lena and I'll help to moderate the Q&A session. 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. I'll give a quick review of how you can enter your questions.

Slide 33: Questions
Speaker: Lena Flannery, IEc

Questions can be entered into the "Questions" box at the bottom of the GoToWebinar control panel. We'll pass them on to someone on our team that can best respond. We'll go ahead and start with some of the questions we've gotten so far.

While we're organizing your questions, we'd like to provide a brief reminder that you can access restoration plans, factsheets, and other information on the public comment process on the Trustees' website, https://www.gulfspillrestoration.noaa.gov/.

[See Summary of Questions and Answers for the Q&A portion of the webinar.]

Thank you for your questions for the Open Ocean TIG. I'll pass it back to Danny to wrap up the webinar.

Slide 34: Thank you
Speaker: Danny Wiegand, US EPA

Thank you, Lena. And we'd like to thank everyone for joining today's webinar and hope you've found it helpful.

Soon, we'll post the presentation and written transcript to the Trustees' website. To find the Open Ocean webpage go to https://www.gulfspillrestoration.noaa.gov/ and click on the Open Ocean icon, which is shown in the upper right of this slide. If you would like to contact the Open Ocean Trustees, you can use the email address shown on the slide.

We'll now conclude our webinar. Thank you all very much for participating.

Message in the chat: You can contact the Open Ocean TIG at openocean.tig@noaa.gov. Today's presentation and a transcript will be made available on the Trustee website at https://www.gulfspillrestoration.noaa.gov/ within a few days following the webinar.

Summary of Questions and Answers

Question: How do we quantify the multiple benefits of protecting healthy marshes and wetlands along the gulf coast?

Response [Laurie Rounds, NOAA]: The Open Ocean Trustee Implementation Group conducts planning for the oceanic and highly migratory species injured by the oil spill. Restoration of wetlands and nearshore habitat injured by the spill is a very important component of the DWH program, and there are many marsh restoration projects being conducted in the other Trustee Implementation Groups. You can learn more about marsh and other wetland and nearshore restoration that is being conducted on the Gulf Spill Restoration website. Thank you again for your questions.

Question: I have family down in Brunswick, GA. How has Jekyll Island been affected? St. Simons?

Response [Danny Wiegand, US EPA]: Thank you for your interest in the impacts of the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill and if the spill impacted areas outside the Gulf of Mexico. The oil spill resulted from the explosion and uncontrolled release of oil from the BP Macondo oil well located about 50 miles offshore in the Northern Gulf of Mexico. A wide variety of response actions were taken to contain, redirect, disperse, and remove the oil in order to minimize or mitigate damage to public health, public welfare, and natural resources. Due to these unprecedented response actions, the spread of released oil was contained within the Gulf of Mexico. Thank you for your question.

Question: When will the next call for projects be?

Response [Erin Plitsch, DOI]: We are currently screening restoration ideas for our fourth restoration plan and working to implement the bird restoration projects selected in Restoration Plan 3. Although we don't have a set schedule for requesting new ideas, the TIG will continue to consider the most appropriate time to begin a new restoration planning cycle and which restoration types should be included. When we are ready to work on the next restoration plan, we will post a notice on the Gulf Spill Restoration website requesting project ideas for the restoration types that we're considering for that plan. So, we don't know yet, but thank you for your question.

Question: How can I find out whether the project idea I submitted to the portal will be included in an Open Ocean Restoration Plan?

Response [Ben Battle, USDA]: The Open Ocean Trustees are currently screening the project ideas submitted for the next Open Ocean restoration plan. The project ideas that are identified as priorities for helping to meet the Trustees' restoration goals will be developed into project alternatives and released in a Draft Restoration Plan and Environmental Assessment for public comment. We anticipate the release of the draft plan in the late summer or early fall of 2024. This may seem like a very long time, but restoration plan development is a detailed process the Trustees follow to meet our requirements for the *Deepwater Horizon* Natural Resource Damage Assessment Program. Please check the Gulf Spill

Restoration website, where you can sign up to receive emails when restoration plans are released and other updates on DWH restoration efforts. Thank you for your question.

Question: Who implements the restoration projects?

Response [Erin Plitsch, DOI]: Restoration projects can be implemented in multiple ways and can involve many types of partners and opportunities for stakeholder participation. Projects selected for implementation are detailed in the Trustees' Final Restoration plans, which are completed after comments on the draft plan are considered and incorporated. A Trustee implementation lead is identified for each project, and they determine the most effective methods for implementation for that project. The Trustee implementation lead may reach out to potential partners and stakeholders and follows their own contracting or agreement requirements to facilitate implementation. Therefore, the best way to identify opportunities to bid on work is to follow the implementing agency's existing notices or announcements for bids or proposals. Thank you for your question.

Question: Do any of your current projects include outreach components to raise public awareness?

Response [Laurie Rounds, NOAA]: Outreach is an important component of many of our projects. It's definitely an important area we like to include in our restoration. It ranges depending on the project, and we try to work with a variety of stakeholders and local organizations. In our project highlights, I mentioned several projects that are working with local partners and looking to increase awareness of both restoration and also the important resources that were impacted by the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill.

For example, the MDBC Active Management and Protection Project includes activities to increase awareness because many people don't know a lot about deep-sea habitats. We're really excited about the increased capacity to be able to share that information with school groups and through other outreach and community events, in addition to developing partnerships with aquariums.

We also do outreach to increase public awareness through working with stakeholders such as fishermen. Our "Return 'Em Right" project focuses on education and outreach to increase awareness of barotrauma, which occurs when fish from deeper waters are caught and released and experience negative impacts from the change in pressure. This project has been doing a lot of outreach to increase awareness of this issue and provide tools for reducing its impacts.

These are a couple of the many ways we incorporate outreach into our projects to raise public awareness. Thank you very much for your question.

Question:

Are any of these projects getting additional funds from the private sector carbon sequestration markets, like through the Texas Coastal Exchange? Many USDA projects are tapping into these carbon markets, and I believe that this pool of funding will be many times greater than the current gulf restoration funds. As companies like Shell, BP, and others commit many billions to carbon sequestration, it would be great

if the gulf restoration projects could act as demonstration projects that could be expanded as these additional voluntary investments come to the gulf coast.

Response [Ben Battle, USDA]:

The DWH NRDA restoration projects are intended to restore natural resource damage injuries caused by the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill. To the extent possible, other efforts like this can build on each other and create synergy. We look forward to continuing to find opportunities to connect efforts where possible. Thank you for the question.