

**STATEMENT OF THOMAS STRICKLAND  
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR FOR  
FISH AND WILDLIFE AND PARKS  
BEFORE THE  
NATIONAL COMMISSION ON THE BP DEEPWATER HORIZON OIL SPILL  
AND OFFSHORE DRILLING**

**SEPTEMBER 28, 2010**

Good afternoon Chairman Graham, Chairman Reilly and Members of the Commission. I am Tom Strickland and I am the Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks at the Department of the Interior. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

Following Secretary Salazar's appearance before you yesterday, I am pleased to be here to convey the Department of the Interior's views on the importance of a restored Gulf Coast ecosystem to the entire country. We are at an historic moment of opportunity to not only repair the enormous damage inflicted on this ecosystem from the *BP Deepwater Horizon* explosion and oil spill, but to work toward long term restoration. This will require a coordinated effort involving numerous federal agencies, five Gulf Coast states, Native American Tribes, Parishes and other local governments and diverse stakeholders with significant economic and environmental interests.

I grew up on the Gulf Coast of Texas, went to college in Louisiana, worked on an oil rig off the Louisiana Coast and have a deep appreciation for the Gulf Coast and its people and culture. I understand its significant contributions to the nation's commerce, seafood supply, and energy security.

Since the April 20<sup>th</sup> blowout, I have made sixteen trips to the Gulf to oversee the Department of the Interior response efforts. We had over two thousand Department of the Interior employees engaged in the spill response throughout the five Gulf Coast states. From the air, water and on foot, I saw firsthand the ecological devastation and disruption in livelihood caused by oil from the spill. I also saw and met with hundreds of dedicated federal, state and local government employees working together in an unprecedented response effort. As a result of this response effort, we were able to mitigate the immediate appearance of oil along much of the coast. Nonetheless, oil appeared on approximately one thousand miles of coastline —275 miles of which were Department of the Interior lands. With the successful initial kill of the well on July 15<sup>th</sup>, new oil stopped flowing into the Gulf, but the millions of gallons of oil already spilled continued to impact the ecosystem. At this point, the appearance of oil on coastline has diminished, but there remains much uncertainty about the longer-term impacts.

We are now shifting our attention from oil spill response to recovery and restoration which involves a significant partnership between the federal government and the Gulf Coast states. Along with the Department of Commerce and the States of Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas, we at the Department of the Interior will be formally initiating full damage assessment and long term restoration planning under the Oil Pollution Act's Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) process this week. This is the second phase of the NRDA process. The initial "preassessment" phase is well underway. The Department of Defense will be joining in the effort soon. Together, the federal agencies and states involved in this effort comprise a Trustee Council which will address recovery and restoration actions under the Oil

Pollution Act (OPA) in response to the oil spill. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, on behalf of the Department of the Interior, serves as the Federal Lead Administrative Trustee for this effort.

The Trustee Council is working to identify injuries to natural resources resulting from the spill, provide for restoration of the injured resources to pre-spill baseline conditions, and obtain compensation from responsible parties for losses that continue until baseline conditions are restored. The Council has commissioned 13 separate technical working groups to develop studies to evaluate the effects of the spill on important, shared resources such as birds, fish, marshlands and marine life, but also to evaluate the impacts from the spill on the overall gulf ecosystem and on human use of those resources, such as hiking, fishing, birding and camping. Even before this formal assessment began, the state and federal trustees were working from day one of the spill to monitor the spill's progression, collect real time data and evaluate baseline conditions.

The Natural Resource Damage Assessment efforts are intended to quantify injuries to natural resources caused by the spill. The cost of those injuries is then sought from responsible parties under OPA. All money obtained from responsible parties as natural resource damages must be used for purposes of assessment and ecosystem restoration. The trustees intend to be strategic about these restoration efforts, so as to ensure that they are coordinated with local and regional planning efforts that are already underway.

The OPA damage assessment and restoration process is also one where public input is required and encouraged. The trustees will draw on the significant expertise of NGOs and the academic

community in selecting sound and supportable restoration projects. The OPA natural resource damage assessment and restoration resulting from *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill can and should serve as the catalyst for real and sustainable Gulf Coast restoration.

### **Major Restoration and Planning Efforts Underway Prior to the Spill**

Even before the devastating effects of the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill, the Gulf Coast has been, and continues to be, degraded by a combination of human activities, including: various forms of development and changes to the flow of rivers and other water-courses. Water and air pollution, as well as natural forces such as hurricanes and the subsidence of certain coastal lands have also contributed to its degradation.

The challenges to the integrity of Gulf Coast ecosystems include:

- Loss of wetlands habitat, including coastal marshes and wetlands and barrier islands, which undermines protections for coastal communities and has deleterious impacts on fish and wildlife resources;
- Loss and degradation of coastal estuarine habitat by a variety of means, including changes in freshwater inflows, degradation of water quality, and coastal development that negatively affects and imperils fishery resources in the Gulf;
- Hypoxia which is caused by excessive nutrient inputs to the gulf and creates “dead zones” that reduce quality of Gulf habitat for fisheries; and
- Climate change which is altering the physical and biological characteristics of the Gulf, its coasts and adjacent watersheds.

Prior to Deepwater Horizon oil spill there were restoration projects in various stages of planning and implementation in each of the five Gulf Coast states. These ongoing programs include the work of the Army Corps of Engineers in collaboration with the States of Louisiana and Mississippi to implement the Louisiana Coastal Area projects and the Mississippi Coastal Improvement Programs. In addition, there is the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Program (Breaux Act) that targets dedicated funds in Louisiana for wetlands restoration. Finally, the Coastal Impact Assistance Program administered by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement provides grants to certain Gulf Coast states for the purpose of addressing coastal impacts from oil and gas production.

There are also other partnership efforts underway to address specific challenges, such as: (1) the Mississippi River/Gulf of Mexico Watershed Nutrient Task Force (known as the Hypoxia Task Force), co-chaired by the Environmental Protection Agency and the State of Mississippi, which coordinates the actions of 12 states and five federal agencies on nutrient reduction strategies to lessen the impacts of nutrients on the Gulf of Mexico; and (2) the Gulf of Mexico Alliance, which is a partnership among the five Gulf Coast states to develop strategies and coordinate implementation on certain priority areas including water quality for healthy beaches and seafood, habitat conservation and restoration, and coastal community resilience.

In recognition of the environmental crisis we faced in the Gulf even before the spill, last year the President directed the establishment of the Louisiana-Mississippi Gulf Coast Ecosystem Working Group, which consists of senior level policy officials from several federal agencies and is led by the Council on Environmental Quality and the Office of Management and Budget.

I represent the Department of the Interior in that effort and on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2010, the Working Group released its strategy which provides for a coordinated federal effort to work with the states in pursuing a long term comprehensive restoration program. Because this strategy, known as the *Roadmap for Restoring Ecosystem Resiliency and Sustainability*, is focused on the Mississippi River and deltaic system, it addressed restoration efforts in Louisiana and Mississippi only. Our work was to help support states in gulf restoration through a better coordinated federal approach. It outlined federal actions over an eighteen-month period to address pressing near-term policy, process, and legal hurdles to restoration and laid the foundation for a long-term comprehensive vision to be achieved jointly with the states. Our post-spill restoration efforts will build on priorities articulated in the *Roadmap*, but will include the other three Gulf Coast states—Texas, Alabama and Florida.

### **The Department of the Interior's Role in Gulf Coast Restoration**

As the nation's largest land manager and steward of many of our cultural and natural resources, the Department of the Interior has a major stake in a restored Gulf Coast.

We manage over three million acres of conservation lands in the five Gulf Coast states, including eight units of the National Park System and 36 National Wildlife Refuges. We have stewardship responsibilities for migratory birds, interjurisdictional fish and federally designated species. We have a strong science presence in the region, including the United States Geological Survey National Wetlands Research Center in Lafayette, Louisiana engaged in science and monitoring activities. We also have an extensive network of stream gages and long-term water-quality monitoring sites throughout the Mississippi River Basin and the five Gulf Coast states, through the United States Geological Survey National Water-Quality Assessment Program, National Stream-Quality Accounting

Network, and the Cooperative Water Program. Our estimates of nutrients delivered each spring to the Gulf of Mexico from the Mississippi/Atchafalaya River Basin are used by NOAA to predict the size of the “dead zone” in the northern Gulf of Mexico.

The Department of the Interior is also in the process of establishing a Climate Science Center (CSC) and four Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs) in the gulf area by working in collaboration with the states and other partners. The CSC will provide fundamental scientific information, tools, and techniques that land, water, wildlife, and cultural resource managers and other interested parties can apply to anticipate, monitor, and adapt to climate change impacts. LCCs provide scientific and technical support for landscape-scale conservation planning and design in an adaptive management framework by supporting conservation planning, decision support tools, prioritizing and coordinating research, and identifying inventory and monitoring programs.

### **Partnering to Achieve Ecosystem Restoration**

As we have learned from our twenty year restoration efforts in the Everglades, large scale ecosystem restoration requires a shared vision and coordinated effort. No one entity can do it alone, and this is particularly the case in the Gulf Coast where there are five states, numerous tribes, local governments and federal agencies with important roles. Building on the existing plans that are already in various stages of development, we must focus on solidifying a shared blueprint for Gulf Coast restoration.

Through the NRDA process we will have a vehicle to identify eligible restoration projects which may also go a long way in fostering long term sustainable restoration efforts. In moving from the NRDA process to long term restoration for the Gulf, we need to build on these initial efforts and upon our initial

partnerships within the Trustee Council to develop a broader vision, or shared path, for Gulf Coast restoration.

In addition, we must pursue other funds such as dedicated revenues from statutory penalties resulting from the spill to ensure that we can support projects that go beyond NRDA-funded restoration.

Obviously, realization of these other funding sources will require Congressional action and a commitment to place a priority on the long term health of the Gulf region.

A key element in these efforts will be the development of performance benchmarks to measure progress and allow for adaptive management. Long term monitoring informed by the best available science will also be essential, particularly in view of projected sea level rise due to global climate change.

Many stakeholders have urged the creation of a Congressionally-established Gulf Coast restoration council to oversee and coordinate long term restoration efforts. There are strong arguments for such an approach, and Secretary Mabus recommended such a council in his report to the President. Any such authority, however, should work in tandem with the NRDA trustee process, and ongoing partnerships and programs, and respect the strong state and local interests at stake in the region.

### **Land and Water Conservation Fund**

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) was established by Congress in 1965 for the purpose of acquiring conservation lands throughout the nation and in assisting states in doing the

same. The LWCF is presently authorized to receive \$900 million annually through a portion of motor boat fuel taxes and OCS revenues, with the funds then appropriated by Congress.

The LWCF was created in order to assure that as one generation extracted resources for its benefit, some portion of the royalties would be invested in land and water conservation for the benefit of future generations. The Obama administration has set a goal to fully fund the LWCF by 2014 and has dramatically increased funding in each of its budgets. Full funding of LWCF will provide reliable dollars for land and water conservation efforts nationwide, but are not large enough to pay for a significant part of the costs of large scale ecosystem restoration projects such as the Everglades or the Gulf Coast.

## **Conclusion**

The *BP Deepwater Horizon* explosion and oil spill is viewed by many as one of the worst environmental disaster in American history. The response to the spill was the largest ever and helped to mitigate some of the environmental impacts throughout the Gulf. Now we are embarked in the largest restoration effort ever undertaken in an ecosystem which was already impaired at the time of the spill. The NRDA process is well underway. The Administration is exploring opportunities for early restoration project which can address short term impacts from the spill. These efforts may also help achieve longer term restoration goals. Additional investments will be required, either in the form of directed penalty payments from the responsible parties or other sources, or both. The overall coordination of these efforts will require unprecedented intergovernmental cooperation between state, local, tribal and federal interests and a transparent and inclusive public process, as well as Congressional attention. We

are hopeful that out of this tragedy the rebirth of this extraordinarily important and fragile ecosystem can finally be realized.