

Plan to use BP funds for convention center opposed

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — An environmental group filed suit Thursday to block a decision that would let Alabama use nearly \$60 million in Gulf oil spill funds to build a beachfront convention center.

The Gulf Restoration Network sued the Interior Department and other federal agencies in Washington claiming the money should go to restore wetlands and other parts of the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem, not construct a resort.

The New Orleans-based organization challenged a federal decision to let Alabama use \$58.5 million of the \$100 million it received in oil spill recovery money to build the new complex at Gulf State Park in Gulf Shores. The state has tried for years to replace the 144-room hotel and convention center destroyed by Hurricane Ivan in 2004.

The state received restoration money following the 2010 oil spill and decided to spend some of it on the project, which would cost about \$85 million in all.

"The Alabama convention center is a shocking misuse of restoration dollars that could provide much needed resources to the Gulf's damaged ecosystem," Network director Cyn Sarthou said in a statement.

Coastal communities depend on a healthy Gulf, she said, and money shouldn't be spent "on pet projects that don't do anything to replace the natural resources we lost."

State officials previously said more than \$27 million would be spent at the park for environmental improvements including a research and education facility for students, trails and dune restoration.

Neither the Interior Department nor the Alabama attorney general's office had any immediate comment on the lawsuit.

The year after the massive oil spill, BP PLC provided \$1 billion for restoration along the Gulf Coast, parts of which were smeared with crude and tar balls after the accident.

The money was meant to repair the Gulf Coast environment or improve public access, and a spending plan was approved by federal officials and trustees from Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas.

The lawsuit marked the second time that Alabama's attempts to build a new conference center at the park have resulted in litigation. A court blocked an earlier plan to build a 350-room hotel and let Auburn University lease it to a private management company.

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