

# Trustees got it right

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(Photo: The Press-Citizen)

The hotel and conference center at Gulf State Park had been sliding into shabbiness for years when Hurricane Ivan finished it off in 2004. A decade later, the site remains one of the most scenic pieces of property on the Gulf Coast and is still a fine location for similar facilities.

Bringing a hotel and convention center back to the site would be a boon for Alabama's economy and would allow the state to draw tourist and convention business that it has been losing for years to Florida facilities only a few miles down the road. However, the latest effort to get such a project underway has been challenged in court by a New Orleans-based environmental group that seeks to block the use of funds from the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill recovery program.

Alabama has proposed, and federal authorities have approved, spending \$58.5 million in these funds on the project, which is expected to cost about \$85 million. Despite the expenditure's having the blessing of four different federal agencies — the Department of Agriculture, the Department of the Interior, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency — the Gulf Restoration Network claims the approval violates the law.

It is true, of course, that the former hotel and convention center were not damaged by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010. The facility was long gone by then, thanks to the devastating blow Hurricane Ivan dealt the state six years before.

But it is also true that the loss of the facility has had a deep and lingering impact on the state's economy. The four federal agencies, which act as trustees under the Natural Resources Damage Assessment process outlined in the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, noted that the funds would help provide partial compensation for tourism and business lost in the aftermath of the oil spill.

The Gulf Restoration Network contends the money should go for environmental projects such as building habitats and protecting land. That's obviously important, but a great deal of money has already been spent and will continue to be spent in this way.

The approval of the four federal trustee agencies is a powerful statement of the merits of the Alabama project. The health of the Gulf will always be a concern and its monitoring will never cease, but the return of a well-designed lodging and convention facility to Gulf State Park will pay dividends for decades. We think the trustees got this one right.

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