



Should NRDA oil spill funds be spent on a conference center at Gulf State Park?

Gulf State Park.jpg

In this early 2004 aerial file photo, the Gulf State Park Resort lines a half-mile stretch of beach east of the park's pier. Later that year, Hurricane Ivan with its strong Category 3 storm surge decimated the resort, which was later demolished. (AL.com)

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An \$85.5 million project for **Gulf State Park** in coastal Alabama has stirred controversy because it would be funded through the Natural Resources Damage Assessment process related to the BP oil spill.

The project would use \$58.5 million to rebuild a lodge and conference center lost to Hurricane Ivan in 2004 and include other enhancements such as a dune restoration, an interpretive center and walking trails. The project has the approval of the state legislature and NRDA trustees from federal and state agencies.

The Gulf Restoration Network has filed a lawsuit in federal court to block the project, arguing that the plan is not in keeping with the spirit of the Oil Pollution Act. Opponents say that no convention center was covered in oil at Gulf State Park, and, therefore, NRDA early restoration funds should not pay for a replacement.

AL.com reached out to people on both sides of the issue to get their opinions on the topic. Here's a portion of what they had to say: (Click on their names to read their articles in full.)

Cyn Sarthou, executive director of Gulf Restoration Network:

"The decision by the NRDA trustees to fund the project, in our opinion, violates NRDA and is a violation of the public trust. Alabama and the trustees should focus these funds on a project or projects that will address damage to the natural resources of Alabama and/or the lost use of those resources. To add insult to injury, the trustees failed to fully assess the environmental impacts of the hotel and convention center, including impacts on endangered species that call the beaches and dune habitat of the Gulf State Park their home - many of which were injured by the disaster."

N. Gunter Guy, Jr., commissioner of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources:

"This restoration project presents an unprecedented opportunity to enhance the ecological, recreational, cultural and economic potential of the park. We are seeking to do so much more than just rebuild the lodge and meeting space. Our team has a vision to make Gulf State Park a national model for environmental and economic sustainability."

Here's what some commenters on AL.com had to say about the issue:

Golftvlr2: *"Dear Gulf Restoration Network supporters. Proposals had been made to build a new Resort Hotel and Convention Center prior to the BP Spill. Those proposals had to be shelved due to the oil spill and its effects on the region. The expenditures of money by NRDA to build a Resort and Convention Center will create a revenue generator that will have a great economic impact on the area. The proposal for Oak Mt indicates that it would result in \$18.4 million impact on the local economy annually. Imagine what the impact will be at the beach. With the state budget in such a mess any new revenue generators will help increase annual income, benefit the local areas, and provide funding for those other none income producing restoration projects."*

Sonofthestranger: *"... Why should the spill be blamed for stopping that project? Unless the convention center was going to be built right on the beach in the way of cleanup crews, why should the development have been impacted? Did the spill prevent the concrete trucks from rolling in? Or was it future economic uncertainty due to the spill the developer was worried about? That, too, would be nonsense as the wheels were obviously in motion to make the beaches right (at least for the tourists) long before construction would even be completed."*

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