



Restoring Alabama: Green groups collaborate on 'once-in-a-lifetime opportunity' for conservation funding after oil spill

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MOBILE, Alabama -- While the **2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill** represented an unprecedented environmental crisis in the Gulf of Mexico, the influx of funding earmarked for coastal restoration projects now represents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make lasting impacts on the region impacted by the spill.

As the government restoration process moves from theory into practice, many of the environmental groups who've worked on the spill since 2010 have shifted their focus to form what they call the Alabama Renewal Group, a collaboration of like-minded organizations hoping to help the state get the most positive economic, environmental and community benefit from its undetermined pool of oil spill fine money and to offer a unified voice from several organizations.

Environmental projects long hoped for but hard to pay for may finally get a chance to become reality. The list of proposed projects is already long and getting longer each week, however, as more are submitted.

Group members meet once a week to discuss the latest developments, look at newly proposed restoration projects and try to raise support on the council and among the public for the projects they believe are most beneficial. The group is comprised of Mobile Baykeeper, Ocean Conservancy, the Alabama Coastal Foundation, Oxfam America, the Conservation Alabama Foundation, the Gulf Restoration Network, The Nature Conservancy, the National Wildlife Federation and Birmingham Audubon.

Helping the economy by helping the environment

The group has developed a concept of a "triple bottom line," the belief that restoring the economy, environment and building healthy, safe communities go hand-in-hand and that projects that promote all three objectives should be given priority. They point to the state's \$3.6 billion tourism industry and \$1 billion commercial and recreational fishing activity as evidence that a healthy environment will lead to more economic opportunity.

"We really don't see either/or in any of this," said Kellyn Garrison of The Nature Conservancy. "We know everything is connected so tightly to this triple bottom line of environment, economy and community."

The group, which met with Press-Register/AL.com reporters and editors Thursday, is much less supportive

of strictly economic projects that create no benefit to the environment, or even cause harm to the coastal ecosystems the fine money is meant to restore.

"(The oil spill) was an environmental disaster and what stood out to me was how deeply and thoroughly this community recognized that an environmental disaster wrecked, destroyed our economy," said Casi Callaway, executive director of Mobile Baykeeper. "We are forgetting. That's where we're going to an 'or' instead of 'and.'"

Rather than endorse or object to specific projects, the groups created a spreadsheet evaluating each project submitted to the **state web portal**, evaluating how many of their 32 criteria each project meets. The criteria are grouped into one of four categories: best practices, economic priorities, community priorities and environmental priorities.

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The **Alabama Gulf Coast Recovery Council** -- consisting of Gov. Robert Bentley, the mayors of Mobile, Fairhope, Gulf Shores, Orange Beach, Dauphin Island and Bayou La Batre, as well as county commissioners from Mobile and Baldwin counties and the executive director of the Alabama State Port Authority -- will have the authority to award an undetermined amount of oil spill fine money paid by BP and the other companies involved in the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

The council is still evaluating projects and is still **weighing the merits of economic and environmental** proposals.

Public input is key

Both those on the council and on the outside looking in have said repeatedly that public input is crucial in proposing and evaluating restoration projects. With the exception of the Port Authority director, each council member is an elected official who will depend on feedback from their constituents to make decisions.

But the evaluation process is still a work in progress for a council created by the federal statute. There is no template to rely on. Some are concerned about a lack of transparency throughout the process, arguing that the council's decisions are reached behind closed doors and explained after the fact in the public meetings.

"They meet for several hours and then they have a short meeting with the public, so we don't know everything they're thinking or talking about," Callaway said. "We would like to, but that's the challenge."