

Chris Wells
Chief of Staff and Interim Director Office of Restoration
Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality
c/o Melanie Green
515 E. Amite Street
Jackson, MS 39201

Submitted by e-mail: mgreen@mdeq.ms.gov

January 15, 2020

RE: Comments from Healthy Gulf on Mississippi State Expenditure Plan (MSEP) 2019 Amendment, and on Transparency and Public Participation.

Dear Chris,

Healthy Gulf supports the three projects featured in the MSEP 2019 Amendment: The new Beachfront Resilience project, the amendment to the Beneficial Use of Dredge Material for Marsh Creation, and the amendment to the Miss. Gulf Coast Water Improvement Program. We joined the comment letter from Mississippi Environmental Focus Group (MEFG) which has more details and suggestions.

Representing Healthy Gulf, I've attended and participated in all the Department's Restoration Summits, and our group has answered the agency's call for participation from non-profit groups since 2016. In general, the MDEQ has made good faith efforts at recruiting public participation from non-profit groups. We and other groups have joined when called, for example, in round table issue scoping in Handsboro, in communicating with the agency on restoration priorities, and in volunteering to help assess submissions to the Beach Outfall Design Challenge, and I try to submit thoughtful comments from HG on the various restoration documents when the notice goes out. I and the other non-profits appreciate the agency's special efforts to hold pre-Summit meetings with the Mississippi Environmental Focus Group (MEFG). These have been well conceived, well executed and very helpful.

Public Participation and Transparency

The participation by the public at the 2019 Restoration Summit seemed to decline compared to the previous year's efforts. The presentations at the mid-afternoon educational session about ongoing RESTORE Act-funded were well done, and the Open house information tables in the exhibit hall foyer had adequate information and opportunity for exchange. However, the Round Table discussions at the end of the night did not work very well. Not many people in the meeting remained to take part in the table discussions. I joined the one table to host a discussion and counted four people who stayed there to talk to MDEQ staff. A quick look around the room revealed our's was the only table in use. Jackie Antalan from Operation HomeCare (MS and AL) discussed frustrations her group has with transparency and community benefits from ongoing projects. Howard Page from North Gulfport Land Trust mostly listened. Supervisor Connie Rocko from Harrison County joined the table and said that her constituents did not have adequate information about either the Summit or the projects, and further related that the

Supervisors themselves in Harrison County were confused about restoration projects. These seem to be transparency problems. The 2019 SEP Amendment document covers transparency: **“MDEQ is committed to maintaining transparency with the public and to reporting on RESTORE Act projects, programs and activities”**. I explained the need for MDEQ to provide more information about projects that are in the portal but seem to be languishing there. Everyone who spoke at our table was frustrated to some degree. Those at the table, including MDEQ staff were probably also weary after a long day. None was at his or her best at the end of the evening as the round table session began. Your Restoration staff has the notes from our table and it was pretty clear that the agency needs to do something different to improve public input and participation next year. The round tables were not effective at opening a dialogue with the agency about information needs or as a way to answer questions. I don't know if anyone emailed or called Jackie, Howard or Supervisor Rocko, but nobody called or emailed me to follow up on my comments shared at the table.

One table of four people, out of a meeting with over 200 in attendance, cannot provide the agency with enough information to use to gauge whether its Summit is sending out the right information to the right people each year about the many, many restoration projects being accepted in the portal, sorted and evaluated annually. The Slido instant cell phone poll that MDEQ used again this year was novel and interesting, but I don't see how it can pose very probing questions in the setting of the Summit. I'd be interested to know how well the Slido polls are answering relevant questions and how your Restoration Office is using the information. That night at the table, Jackie Antalan told me about people she knows in the minority non-profit community on the coast who have simply stopped attending the Summit or participating because the agency isn't communicating effectively with them. A Slido cannot address that.

I commented that the portal submission process remains obscure and hard to understand for most people who have not submitted a project, and even for those who have submitted a project, they could use some help in figuring out **a)** how to shepherd their project along or **b)** when to stop investing their time on a project idea that won't work **c)** how to go about updating their project so that it will be more likely to get a good evaluation. The NRDA workshops in Gulfport in the summer of 2018 were at least an attempt by the TIG to get people to engage and help them to submit projects. Perhaps MDEQ could try something like that – a workshop like the ones offered in 2018. It could be earlier in the Summit to catch people while their attention spans are still good, or it could be held at a time other than on the day of the Summit.

MDEQ has the names and addresses of everyone who attended the Summit, and MDEQ has Robbie Wilbur in the public relations office with the newsletter that goes out every month or so. You have Melissa Collier and the office of community engagement to look into how the Summit is working for the populations she focuses on. The agency uses Gloria Tatum as a consultant specializing in community engagement. There are ways to mine existing attendance information and improve next year's Summit and the way the public understands and engages in the Restoration process. The agency needs to make some adjustments and course corrections – adaptive management. The round table format at the end of the meeting cannot be the best way to solicit feedback.

I realize that MDEQ staff is probably doing all it can with the resources they have and I further understand that there are many mandatory steps that Restoration Office staff must follow for due diligence and compliance with rigid, mandatory rules - now that large amounts of money are flowing into projects from the agency. Doing more public relations and more outreach, and education is likely a luxury at this point for the Agency. The Summit is labor-intensive and may be viewed by the state as adequate to fulfill the agency's outreach needs for RESTORE and NRDA. I like the Summit and there isn't a better way to catch up with the status of the BP restoration projects, but some fine tuning can be tried, four years into the process.

The Summit had in attendance contractors, business developers from engineering and consulting firms, federal and state agency people, non-profit staff, some local government officials, and people whose groups, companies or cities administer active, funded restoration projects, but there were fewer people outside of these categories coming to the Summit to engage this year, and I know (via Jackie Antalan and others) that MDEQ is losing some nonprofits that represent low income and minority populations. There remain information needs that the agency could respond to during the fall Summit, or in another format at a different time. I imagine the agency and the Restoration Office would rather move forward with the administration of the money and projects and not consider this type of criticism, but the public notice provides this opportunity to comment. At the very least, someone from MDEQ should call Supervisor Connie Rocko to ask about her concerns if she hasn't been called already. I'd like to discuss this on the phone or in a meeting with Melissa Collier and/or with your Restoration Office staff at some point in the coming weeks or months.

Sincerely,

Andrew Whitehurst

Water Program Director, Healthy Gulf