







Winter 2019

*News from the Gulf.
News for the Gulf.*



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Dear Friends of the Gulf,

This year, Healthy Gulf celebrates 25 years. I marvel at how Healthy Gulf (formerly Gulf Restoration Network) has changed over those years. When I first started in 1995, I was the only employee. Now we have staff, volunteers and supporters like you across the Gulf and the world who are fighting to protect and restore the Gulf of Mexico.

Gulf communities have endured many disasters, yet, in spite of the hardships, we have been able to achieve many victories together. In this issue of Gulf Currents you will find some of our recent victories as well as some of our ongoing challenges.

Sadly, there are still major challenges facing Gulf coastal communities. Healthy Gulf remains committed to helping people and communities as threats to their lives and livelihoods increase. Individual donors like you are more important than ever at a time of shrinking support from charitable foundations.

Healthy Gulf staff, fellows, and volunteers work tirelessly to support coastal communities and protect the incredible natural resources of the Gulf. Your continued support is critical to our ability to continue our work!

Please invest in the ability of Healthy Gulf to support Gulf communities and the natural resources upon which they depend!

Thank you for continuing to partner with Healthy Gulf to protect what you love.

For a healthy Gulf,
Cyn Sarthou, Executive Director



DONATE TODAY AT
healthygulf.org/donate



TAYLOR ENERGY'S 15-YEAR OIL SPILL

Aerial photograph of surface oil
near the Taylor Energy wells.
Photo: Scott Eustis, Healthy Gulf

TAKE ACTION TODAY

For 15 years, Taylor Energy has been spilling oil into the Gulf of Mexico. Now that the Coast Guard and Couvillion Group have contained the spill, the company is still suing to stop the containment effort. Let decisionmakers know that you expect a quick and transparent process to permanently plug Taylor's wells, the assessment of Clean Water Act fines, and the start of an investigation to understand why this company was allowed to spill oil into the Gulf for 15 years. Take action below:

Plug the wells

- 1. Hire team of independent engineers to finish the job and plug the wells.*
- 2. Determine the best course of action to permanently plug Taylor's leaking wells.*

Assess Damages

- 3. Initiate a Natural Resources Damage Assessment (NRDA) to determine long-term environmental impacts of 15 years of oil entering Gulf ecosystems.*
- 4. Assess fines under the Clean Water Act and other applicable laws.*

Learn Lessons

- 5. Convene a congressional hearing to better understand why a company was allowed to continually spill oil into U.S. waters for 15 years.*
- 6. Determine where regulations and the law failed to protect citizens and the ecosystem from oil pollution.*

Take action at: healthygulf.org/tayloraction

A photograph of a Gulf of Mexico Bryde's Whale swimming underwater. The whale is seen from a broadside view, showing its long, dark body with characteristic white, wavy stripes along its side. Its head is pointed towards the left, and its pectoral fin is visible, extending downwards. The water is a deep blue, and the surface is visible at the top of the frame.

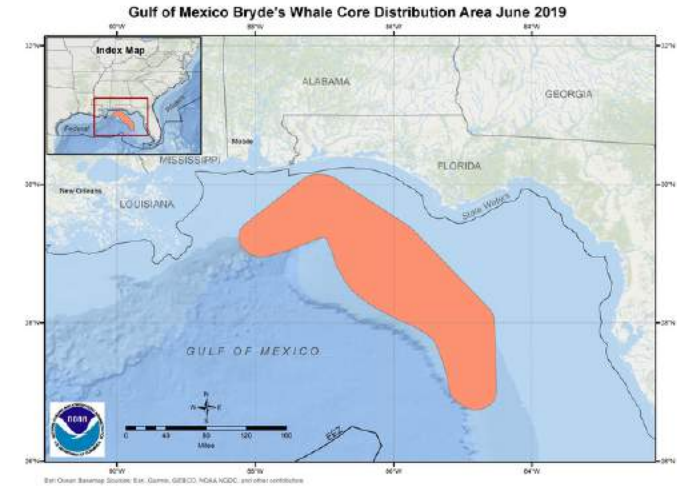
PROTECTING THE GULF OF MEXICO BRYDE'S WHALE

Broadside view of the Gulf of
Mexico Bryde's Whale
Photo: NOAA

Gulf of Mexico Bryde's Whale: Finally Protected Under the ESA

On April 12, 2019, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) finally listed the Gulf of Mexico Bryde's whale as endangered, after years of ignoring legal requests to protect the whale. The Gulf of Mexico Bryde's whale is one of the most endangered great whale populations in the world. A small resident population of these whales exists in the Gulf of Mexico in the waters of the DeSoto Canyon off of Florida, but their numbers are very small, with estimates ranging from 30-50 individuals. Listing gives the whale the legal protections they deserve under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

In February 2019, Healthy Gulf joined the Natural Resources Defense Council and filed a lawsuit against NMFS, and other federal agencies for failing to take action for over two years after its proposed decision to list the species on December 8, 2016. The whales were listed as endangered within two months of filing our lawsuit. Scientists estimate the Gulf Bryde's whales lost 22% of their population during the BP Drilling Disaster. These ESA protections are the first step at giving these whales a fighting chance at survival.



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healthygulf.org/member

TACKLING TOXIC ALGAE



Healthy Gulf & The Ocean Foundation Convene Florida Groups for Cooperative Strategy on Toxic Algae

Who would have thought that environmental issues would become top-line campaign issues in Gulf South elections? Well, they did just that in Florida. States of emergency were announced throughout Florida last year due to the impacts of toxic cyanobacteria (blue-green algae) and red tides. These outbreaks were responsible for health issues, massive sea life die-offs, and millions of dollars lost to local businesses. What did the Florida Legislature do after this catastrophe? Pretty much nothing.

That is why Healthy Gulf and the Ocean Foundation decided to bring 26 advocates from 20 groups together in Fort Myers in October to begin developing a cooperative strategy to combat these worsening toxic algae outbreaks.

While we talked about many issues, some solutions have come to the fore: Florida has to implement an effective toxic algae warning system, septic tanks must be regularly maintained, municipalities must invest in their failing sewage systems, and farms must reduce or eliminate their discharges of toxic algae-causing pollution.

Healthy Gulf has been involved in advocating for the reduction of nitrogen and phosphorus pollution in the Gulf since our inception in 1994. This pollution causes dead zones, fish kills, and toxic algae outbreaks. By bringing together advocates and policy experts in Florida, we hope to support them in bringing about real change that will begin to address the toxic algae crisis in Florida.



Matt Rota, Healthy Gulf's Senior Policy Director, leads a discussion on Toxic Algae.

GULF OYSTERS IN TROUBLE



Photo courtesy Doniree Walker

DEEP DIVE: Across the Gulf, Oysters Are in Trouble

Kendall Dix, Gulf Fish Forever Organizer

If you're like me and you live on the Gulf Coast, oysters have been a topic of growing concern. The opening of Louisiana's Bonnet Carre Spillway twice in one year, a historic first, led to the flushing of unprecedented levels of freshwater into oyster habitats along the Gulf. This left oyster beds east of the Mississippi River completely decimated.

Because of their abundance across the Gulf, oysters are typically cheap, and they are everywhere. There are dozens of restaurants that usually serve Gulf oysters for a dollar or as little as a quarter at happy hour. This year, however, many Gulf oyster fishers lost their entire harvest. The conditions were so bad that New Orleans' iconic Acme Oyster House and Drago's Seafood had to stop selling raw oysters completely in October.

I feel like I've taken for granted how important oysters are to our Gulf culture. We've been blessed with such abundance that we can serve entire dishes made from oysters. Items like an oyster po' boy would be an unimaginable luxury if you used West Coast oysters that typically cost \$3.00 or more a piece. Without the affordable prices that come with abundance, many of our favorite foods would become luxury.

This year really put into perspective the fragility of this iconic Gulf seafood. But 2019 isn't the first year to show signs of oysters being in trouble.

I'll admit that when I attended the annual meeting of the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission meeting earlier this year, I had no idea that oyster production had been declining in the Gulf since the mid-2000s. State representatives from Florida, Alabama and Mississippi all painted a grim picture.

"Oysters are in trouble, and we have no idea how to help them," was the message I took away from the Eastern Gulf presentations. Florida, Alabama and Mississippi have been using money from the BP drilling disaster settlement and other funds to restore their natural reefs, but with little progress. Read more and see the data at

www.healthygulf.org/oystercrisis

An aerial photograph of the Bolivar Peninsula in Texas. The image shows a long, narrow strip of land with a grid-like pattern of fields and some buildings. The coastline is visible on the right side, with waves breaking against the shore. The surrounding water is a deep blue-grey color. A large, dark, irregular shape is visible in the upper left, possibly a bay or a large body of water. The overall scene is a mix of natural and developed land.

TEXAS' IKE DIKE REDESIGNED

Aerial view of Bolivar Peninsula
Photo: Scott Eustis, Healthy Gulf

Texas' Ike Dike Under Scrutiny by Community Members, redesigned

Healthy Gulf helped stop the infamous \$31 Billion Ike Dike from destroying the Texas coast and endangering coastal residents. In coordination with Galveston Bay Foundation, Turtle Island Network, and Bayou City Waterkeeper, we submitted a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to the Army Corps of Engineer for data showing the boundaries of the Ike Dike proposal. With this information we were able to create timely and relevant information regarding the Ike Dike proposal. We disseminated this information to local residents, ultimately creating a compelling report, [*Divided We Fail*](#), that communities used in their defense. The report revealed our findings that more than 2,000 homes and buildings would be in harm's way if the Ike Dike were constructed as designed. The Corps had apparently skipped over these "details" in its own analysis, but Healthy Gulf thought it was important to show local communities the actual costs of building the barrier.

The communities along the Texas coast around Galveston Island and Bolivar Peninsula used our maps and analysis to mobilize. Citizens turned out in large numbers to public meetings in the county, and submitted hundreds of comment letters. Because of Healthy Gulf's report, the Corp was forced to change the design of their ill-conceived barrier. Our report and data were essential to informing and empowering this grassroots opposition. The Corps has since backed off from the Ike Dike barrier plan, although they are still pushing forward with gates at the entrance to Galveston Bay at Bolivar Roads. While homes and businesses are now safe from destruction from the Ike Dike barrier itself, the ominous "gates" at Bolivar Roads still loom. If built, large mechanical gates would restrict the natural movement of animals and water in and out of the Bay. Furthermore, Bolivar Roads could become a severe bottleneck for shipping which has economic and human well-being implications for the entire region. The gates would be more than two miles of wall, pylons and movable gates, including 100 lift gates and a 1,200 foot floating sector gate with two large swinging "doors". We are still working on making sure this ecologically and economically disastrous project never gets built. The Texas coast and Galveston Bay dodged a bullet, but is still in danger. We must continue to provide our expertise to empower the preservation of these communities and ecosystems by ensuring the Ike Dike and the gates never see the light of day. We'll continue to agitate for sustainable infrastructure and floodplain management plans that protect Texans from hurricanes.

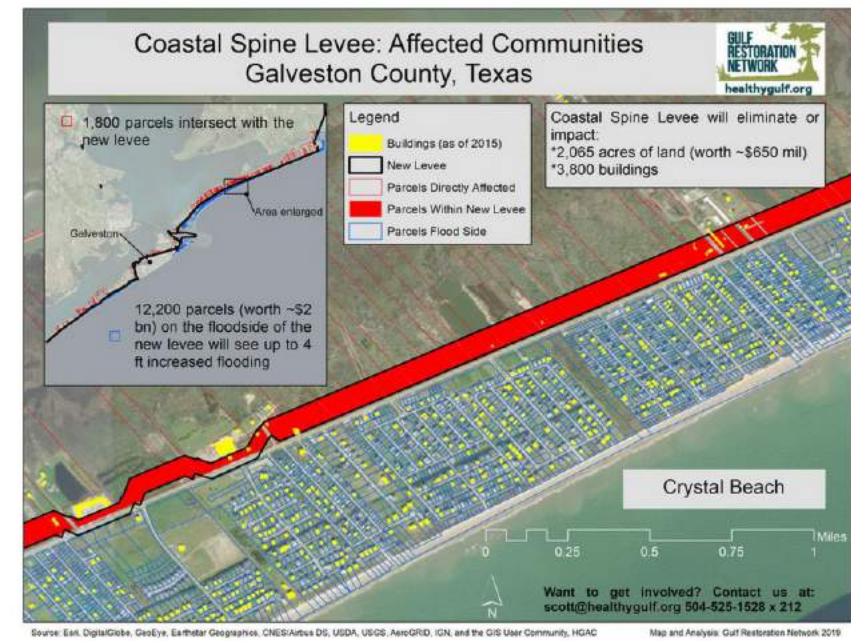


Figure 3. Crystal Beach, TX, overview of impact of coastal barrier project on buildings (2015) and parcels (2018).



BP: 10 YEARS LATER

Join us in April of 2020 to demand that the Well Control & Blowout Preventer Rule which was gutted by the Trump Administration is replaced and strengthened. The Gulf is no safer today than it was the day before the BP Oil Drilling Disaster, and that is absolutely unacceptable.

BP Safety Rules Gutted, Healthy Gulf Sues

The Trump administration has rolled back parts of the landmark Blowout Preventer Systems and Well Control Rule that was enacted to significantly reduce the risk of another catastrophic oil spill like the 2010 BP drilling disaster.

The Well Control Rule was put into place in 2016 after 6 years of independent studies looked at ways to prevent another drilling disaster like BP's. During the BP disaster, operators lost control of the well causing an enormous explosion that killed 11 offshore workers and spilled 210 million gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico.

The rule was intended to ensure drillers were better prepared and able to respond to unexpected drilling events, and that cutting-edge technology was there as a backup if something did go wrong. Those rules are now gutted.

Before gutting the safety measures, the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE) was excusing the oil and gas industry from adopting the necessary safety measures. [Data released by Politico](#) shows that since the passage of the Well Control Rule in 2016, BSEE has issued nearly 1,700 waivers to oil companies. BSEE has now rolled back portions of the rule, weakening real-time monitoring of offshore operations and watering down testing requirements for critical safety devices like blowout preventers.

Healthy Gulf has filed two lawsuits because:



BSEE rolled back these rules without significant justification given the agency's previous findings that these rules were necessary for worker and environmental safety.



BSEE essentially instituted a new rule by issuing over 1,700 waivers (or *alternate compliances*) to the Well Control Rule. They did so without the legally required public comment process.

“This administration is actively ignoring the findings of independent experts to satisfy their friends in the oil industry. We simply cannot let Big Oil call the shots. We saw how prioritizing oil industry profits by relaxing regulations and reducing oversight led up to BP spilling over 210 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.”

Cyn Sarthou, Healthy Gulf Executive Director



Our members provide Healthy Gulf both moral and financial support for programs that protect Gulf communities. Healthy Gulf has made a conscious decision to never take money from polluting industries or the government. We believe that the Gulf South deserves an independent watchdog looking out for Gulf communities. Members are valuable to our work and our independence. Please consider becoming a member today and help us unite and empower people to protect and restore the Gulf.

BECOME A MEMBER AT
healthygulf.org/member

In Memoriam:

Remembering the Gulf Heroes we lost in 2019



Hal Suter

Hal was a Healthy Gulf board member since 2013 who was known for bringing together organized labor, environmental groups, businesses, and social justice groups in Texas. His sense of humor and his passion for people and the environment will be greatly missed by everyone who had the pleasure of knowing him.



Ray Nichols

Ray was a force for good in New Orleans. Always with a smile and a story, he had the ability to make any person feel like they were the most important person in the room. Ray's impact on this region will be felt for generations through all of the young activists who saw Ray as a mentor. Ray's super power was connecting people who were doing good work.



Lance Rydberg

Lance was a passionate advocate for the Gulf. He made a real difference in South Louisiana by combining his love of flying, coastal restoration and the law. We cherish each moment Lance gave selflessly flying Healthy Gulf's team over South Louisiana to document pollution and coastal land loss.

Photo courtesy of Southwings.



David Underhill

A tireless advocate for civil rights, justice and the environment, David spent his years in the Gulf writing, protesting, and speaking truth to power. David always showed up for marginalized communities and told their stories in a way that brought light to injustices because it was the right thing to do.

Photo by: Karen Savage