

Building a Better Future for the Gulf of Mexico

The Gulf of Mexico is widely regarded as a major energy hub and a vitally important part of our national economy. It is also home to a rich and diverse ecosystem and is a popular destination for ocean and coastal tourism. But the role the Gulf has played as an economic engine has come at a significant environmental cost. Sea level rise, dramatic loss of wetlands, hypoxia, and agricultural runoff are just some of the issues that need to be addressed. The changing environmental conditions in the Gulf of Mexico highlight the need to think critically about the management of resources. In addition to the economic risks, communities along the coast are vulnerable to severe storms because of the erosion of important natural protective features, like barrier islands and wetlands.

The influx of significant resources for restoration presents the region with an opportunity to address many of these challenges and build a new future for the Gulf. These issues are regionally important, nationally significant, and represent the major ocean and coastal challenges facing the Gulf of Mexico. Even with unprecedented resources, Gulf leaders will need to utilize science-based planning and assessment, support interagency and intraregional coordination, and ensure timely project execution to create more sustainable and resilient communities.

Gulf of Mexico Ocean Leadership Roundtable

As part of JOCI's effort to develop an Ocean Action Agenda to deliver to current leaders and those taking office after the 2016 elections, JOCI brought together representatives from federal, state, and local government, leading scientists, and experts from key Gulf of Mexico industries and nongovernmental organizations in May 2016 for the Gulf of Mexico Ocean Leadership Roundtable. Held in New Orleans, this meeting was designed to gather input on how our nation should be addressing Gulf ocean and coastal priorities. Participants discussed the following topics:

- Ports, shipping, fishing and tourism—important elements of the Gulf economy
- Oil and gas development
- Building resilience along the Gulf Coast
- Environmental restoration

This document summarizes the key priorities, themes, and ideas that emerged from the discussion at the Gulf of Mexico Ocean Leadership Roundtable.



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Priorities Identified by Gulf Coast Leaders

Communicate the risks of climate change: From sea level rise to erosion, the Gulf coast is facing a combination of changes that are threatening communities. Our nation's leaders should effectively communicate the dramatic nature of climate change impacts to empower communities and inform decision making.

Invest in Gulf-wide ecosystem science: The changes facing the Gulf demand a comprehensive research system to inform decision making. The scientific community should adopt a multidisciplinary and ecosystem-wide approach to science and research in the Gulf that takes advantage of the diversity of scientific resources available to address a range of issues from hypoxia to sea level rise. Furthermore, the federal government should invest in Gulf-wide ocean observation systems that combine physical and biological information to achieve comprehensive monitoring of the entire Gulf.

Facilitate effective and sustainable restoration: The Gulf Coast has the opportunity to address decades of environmental degradation and build a more sustainable and resilient future. Resources that have become available through penalties, natural resource damage payments, and other commitments stemming from the Deepwater Horizon incident will go a long way, but the challenges facing the Gulf are immense and long-term. The federal government and Gulf States have to work cooperatively through entities such as the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council and the Deepwater Horizon Natural Resource Damage Assessment Trustee Council to effectively and sustainably restore coastal ecosystems and economies. Our nation's leaders should actively support local initiatives by providing funding and expediting agency approval processes as appropriate.

Encourage leadership from the oil and gas sector: Given the oil and gas industry's significant resources and expertise, our nation's leaders should encourage them to help build a more sustainable and resilient Gulf. The important economic role the industry plays needs to be balanced with proper attention to the environmental implications of their work. Industry and other Gulf leaders should collaborate to support science and research, ensure safety regulations are keeping pace with new innovations in the oil and gas industry, and promote best safety practices in energy development.

Support a comprehensive approach to diversify and develop the Gulf economy: Future policy efforts should support a broad range of economic activities in the Gulf, from shipping and fishing to the insurance and financial sectors. The federal government should support infrastructure investments in Gulf ports, support basic science and research that improves decision making, and proactively engage with Gulf communities to build resilience. Investments in resilience not only help protect the economic livelihoods of Gulf communities, but can also play a crucial role in economic development.

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