

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
H-232, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
H-204, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
S-230, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
S-221, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Steny Hoyer
Majority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
H-107, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

April 30, 2020

CC: Louisiana Delegation

On behalf of the listed organizations, which together represent millions of members across the country, we sincerely thank you for the tremendous leadership you have shown thus far in response to the COVID-19 crisis, and for your continued work to address the toll this unprecedented challenge is taking on our fellow Americans and our nation's economy.

We fully appreciate the importance of your current legislative focus on direct response and relief to meet immediate needs of America's health systems, families, and at-risk businesses. We also share your and the President's expressed recognition that expanding that legislative energy to solidify and hasten our national economic recovery will be needed in the near future. When Congress turns its attention to investments required for economic stimulus and lasting revitalization, we urge you to broaden the existing federal commitment to the restoration economy in coastal Louisiana.

As one of our country's most distressed coronavirus "hot spots," Louisiana is currently enduring devastating impacts from COVID-19. Louisiana's infection and mortality rates are far higher than those of most other states. In addition, according to a recent Brookings report, Louisiana has three population areas in the top 30 across the country, when ranked by percentage of workers in industries with the highest economic risk from COVID-19.^{1,2} Reduced energy demand is exacerbating the employment

¹ Houma-Thibodaux, LA, 29.3%; New Orleans, LA, 23.3%; Lafayette, LA 20.9%.

² <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2020/03/17/the-places-a-covid-19-recession-will-likely-hit-hardest/>

decline here more than elsewhere, posing additional challenges regarding the scope and duration of these job losses. In short, the state is reeling from disproportionate job losses and business contractions.

These conditions are unfolding in the context of Louisiana's longstanding, existential land-loss crisis: a football field of the state's coastal wetlands vanishes into open water every 100 minutes. Since the 1930s, Louisiana has lost over 2,000 square miles of land, an area roughly the size of Delaware. Reversing land loss in Louisiana is a coordinated and major priority at the federal, state, and local level to support endangered coastal communities, economic activity, and wildlife.

Targeted investments, like the ones described in this letter, will be essential to responding to the unique shock that coronavirus is inflicting on Louisiana and its complex, disappearing coast. Congress has the opportunity to produce cascading benefits by directing resources to Louisiana's land loss crisis and restoring the coast. Those focused resources will create local jobs, protect vital economic infrastructure, and enhance the resiliency of coastal communities. They will also yield results for the national economy as Louisiana's diverse sectors, such as shipping, fisheries, energy, coastal restoration, and tourism, are interwoven into the health of the U.S. economy. We have seen investments like these bear fruit in previous economic downturns. In 2009, ecosystem restoration was an economic powerhouse that helped lead the way to recovery.

Fortunately, Louisiana has a Master Plan to guide federal investments, which is a 50-year blueprint that combines projects to restore, build or maintain coastal wetlands with projects to provide enhanced risk reduction for coastal communities from storms and flooding. This plan is critical and necessary because Louisiana's wetlands comprise 40% of all wetlands in the continental U.S.³ and provide an essential buffer to communities and industries from storms. Further, the Delta supports a \$9.3 billion ecotourism in Louisiana, \$1.8 billion in recreational fishing, 30 percent of all commercial fishing landings in the continental U.S., and five of the nation's 15 largest shipping ports by cargo volume. Additionally, coastal restoration in southeast Louisiana has provided 32,000 jobs averaging \$69,277 per year.⁴

Below please find our specific ideas on ways for Congress to deliver investment to Louisiana and its coast.

1. Advance critical ecosystem restoration projects by providing funding for the Coastal Master Plan.

We recommend that stimulus funding support restoration projects contained in the Master Plan. Louisiana's Coastal Master Plan - which has undergone rigorous scientific review and received unanimous, bipartisan support from both houses of the state Legislature - should be the roadmap for federal investment.

This is critically important as Louisiana's Coastal Master Plan will see less funding in the coming years due to the impacts of COVID-19 on oil prices. The Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act (GOMESA) is an oil and gas revenue sharing program that funds restoration and hurricane protection in the Gulf of Mexico, and in Louisiana specifically, these funds go to the Coastal Master Plan. Because of the low price

³ <https://www2.southeastern.edu/orgs/oilspill/wetlands.html>

⁴ <http://mississippiriverdelta.org/whats-at-stake/economy/>

of oil due in part to the spread of COVID-19, the funding dispersed will be severely low, impacting urgent restoration efforts.

To that end, there are several possible ways for Congress to provide funding that will allow the state to apply that money to Master Plan projects. Congress could give direct grants to Louisiana's Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority. These grants must be direct, upfront, and not reimbursable, in order to have the intended stimulus effect. Alternatively, Congress could provide funds to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's (NFWF) highly successful Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund (GEBF), which would award funds to Louisiana.

There are many projects in Louisiana's Coastal Master Plan that could be advanced with stimulus funds to create jobs, protect communities, and restore critical ecosystems. Louisiana's appropriation process for the Coastal Master Plan includes an Annual Spending Plan with a three-year budget projection, which is broken down project by project. This enables a robust means of targeting projects where stimulus dollars can bring about rapid job creation at every stage of the process, from initial planning and design, through regulatory evaluation, engineering, contracting, construction and operation. A few examples, with total project construction costs in parenthesis, include:

- Project Construction
 - Bayou Terre aux Boeufs Ridge Restoration - St. Bernard/Plaquemines Parishes (\$6 million)
 - Caernarvon Diversion - Plaquemines Parish (\$15 million)
 - Caminada Headland Marsh Creation - Lafourche/Jefferson Parishes (\$4 million)
 - Houma Navigation Canal Lock - Terrebonne Parish (\$320 million)
 - Maurepas Diversion - St. John Parish (\$70 million)
 - Terrebonne Barrier Island Restoration - Terrebonne/Lafourche Parishes (\$27 million)
 - Violet Siphon Intake Repair - St. Bernard Parish (\$350,000)

- Project Planning and Design
 - Ama Diversion - St. Charles Parish (\$883 million)
 - East Bank Land Bridge Project - St. Bernard/Plaquemines Parishes (\$92 million)
 - Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion - Plaquemines/Jefferson Parishes (\$1.4 billion)
 - Union Diversion - Ascension Parish (\$876 million)

2. Increase the only sustained, long-term federal funding source for Louisiana's coastal restoration program under the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act of 2006 (Pub. Law 109-432).

Our organizations also recommend dedicating more of the existing Gulf offshore energy production revenue to sustain long-term investment in coastal restoration and hurricane risk reduction in the Gulf States. Specifically, we ask Congress to eliminate the \$500 million cap on currently shared GOMESA revenues to sustain a restoration economy over the long-term.

GOMESA has been a critically important funding stream for Louisiana and the other producing Gulf Coast states. GOMESA is an important program for restoration, resilience, and job creation across the

Gulf of Mexico, expanding upon its success will protect national economic assets, provide better protection from storms, and enhance coastal habitat.

3. Deliver projects faster while employing Louisianans in the restoration economy.

- We recommend that Congress increase resources to federal agencies for permitting and consultation for Coastal Master Plan projects.⁵ Enhanced funding for these programs ensures that permitting offices are properly resourced to complete project reviews swiftly and is the most effective way to expedite project delivery and produce positive environmental outcomes. Many permitting programs are backlogged because there is inadequate funding for staff. Congress has the opportunity with this funding to change that dynamic for Coastal Master Plan projects and accelerate the coastal program without sacrificing robust, science-based environmental reviews.
- We also recommend that Congress increase funding for:
 - National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences' (NIEH) Environmental Career Worker Training Program (\$10 million). A part of the Worker Training Program at NIEHS, this program already supports the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice in Louisiana, where these new resources should go. It is also worth noting that this program also supports numerous other NGOs⁶ across the country to train workers, and these efforts should be coordinated with local NGOs who could use the additional worker capacity; and
 - U.S. Department of Labor's Community-Based Job Training Grants (\$40 million), which could support existing Louisiana coastal jobs-oriented programs, e.g., at Fletcher, Northshore, Nunez, and Delgado Technical Community Colleges.
 - A revitalized and expanded national Conservation Corps program to support job creation in the conservation and natural resources space.

Multiple reports confirm that, if funded, coastal restoration projects can be a significant and consistent economic driver that provides and sustains thousands of jobs. Those jobs are in engineering and design, heavy equipment operating, operation and maintenance, and basic construction. Without a significant increase in job and skills training, including a specific focus on equitable and inclusive training and hiring, Louisiana workers and their communities will miss the economic and employment opportunities

⁵ Agency examples include U.S. Fish and Wildlife (Planning and Consultations Program - Endangered Species Act Consultations), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (Protected Species Program - Endangered Species Act, Marine Mammal Protection Act, and Essential Fish Habitat Consultations), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Regulatory Program - Clean Water Act Consultations)

⁶ Alabama Fire College; Community College Consortium for Health and Safety Training; CPWR-The Center for Construction Research and Training; Duke University; Emory University; Indiana University Bloomington; International Association of Fire Fighters; International Brotherhood of Teamsters; International Chemical Workers Union Council Center for Worker Health and Safety Education; International Union of Operating Engineers National Training Fund; International Union, United Auto Workers; LIUNA Training and Education Fund; Midwest Consortium for Hazardous Waste Worker Training; New Jersey/New York Hazardous Materials Worker Training Center; Nova Southeastern University; OAI, Inc.; Texas Southern University / Deep South Center for Environmental Justice; Texas-Utah Consortium for Hazardous Waste Worker Education and Training; The New England Consortium-Civil Service Employees Association; The Steelworkers Charitable and Educational Organization; University of Alabama at Birmingham; Western Region Universities Consortium

that should stem from these investments. These programs can provide transition support for workers being laid off in the energy industry as well.

4. Support fishing communities and respond to climate impacts to fisheries in the Gulf.

The fishing industry in the Gulf of Mexico is being challenged by climate driven impacts that are changing habitats, and has now been fragmented by the impacts of COVID-19. The industry needs robust support from Congress. Not only is it important to provide resources to fishing communities and support their disrupted livelihoods, but it is also important to preserve the industry, which is an economic driver in the Gulf of Mexico. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, finfish and shellfish industries in the Gulf of Mexico generate \$21.5 billion in sales (10.1 percent of total U.S. sales) and support 146,000 jobs.⁷

We are encouraged by the \$300 million in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to support fishing communities and the related industries, but more money should be allocated to get fishermen through this challenging time, including through alternate near-term employment opportunities like marine debris removal, enhanced data collection, and/or grant funding to small, non-native speaking businesses. Future allocations should also work to help fishing communities adapt to climate impacts over the long-term. As sea levels rise, ocean warming, and ocean acidification continue to take a toll on fishing communities in the Gulf of Mexico, we encourage Congress to help fishing communities adapt to climate change, deal with the impacts of COVID-19, and ensure long term sustainability of fisheries and the related ecosystems.

5. Provide additional funding for agencies with programs that work in tandem with Louisiana's Coastal Master Plan to restore coastal ecosystems, and specifically the Gulf of Mexico.

We recommend that Congress provide funding to federal programs that have been advancing and leveraging complementary restoration efforts in the Gulf for years. For these programs that have been funded/appropriated, funds should be disbursed to local entities or partners within three months of budget approval/appropriation as these funds are critical now more than ever to ensure the work that these programs fund are able to continue, and 2020 appropriations renewed considering the COVID impacts to local partners for the current fiscal year including:

Those programs include:

- **Environmental Protection Agency:** Gulf of Mexico Program, Lake Pontchartrain Basin Restoration Program, National Estuary Program
- **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration:** National Estuarine Research Reserve Program, Title IX Fund Grants, National Sea Grant College Program
- **Department of the Interior:** North American Wetlands Conservation Act, Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act

To conclude, prioritizing the restoration of Louisiana's Coast will help reinvigorate local economies and jobs impacted by the spread of COVID-19, while protecting national assets, increasing storm protection

⁷ https://www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/Assets/economics/publications/FEUS/FEUS-2015/Report-Chapters/FEUS%202015-AllChapters_Final.pdf

benefits, enhancing coastal ecosystems, and providing more recreational opportunities. We hope you will consider the above opportunities for inclusion in any future stimulus package.

Sincerely,

Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana
Environmental Defense Fund
Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation
National Audubon Society
National Wildlife Federation