MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION

7 October 2016

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Chair, Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council
Hale Boggs Federal Building
500 Poydras Street, Suite 1117
New Orleans, LA 70130

Re: Comments on Draft Comprehensive Plan Update 2016

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

The Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (Council) recently published a notice of availability of its Draft Comprehensive Plan Update 2016 (Plan Update) to implement Council-funded restoration activities under the Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities, and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States (RESTORE) Act of 2012 (81 Fed. Reg. 57582). The revisions in the Plan Update reflect comments received and lessons learned since the issuance of the Council's initial Comprehensive Plan and draft Funded Priorities List.

The Marine Mammal Commission (Commission) supports the Plan Update and its emphasis on improving Council decision-making through enhanced Council member coordination, stronger collaborations with other funding sources, improved application of the best available science, more robust measures of success, and greater public engagement and transparency. The Commission also supports the Council's new vision statement emphasizing collaborations on strategic restoration projects and programs as a means to achieving a healthy and productive Gulf ecosystem.

The Plan Update clarified one of its goals to include the restoration of water quantity as well as water quality. Although the Plan Update does not provide specific details regarding the impetus for this clarification, it is the Commission's understanding that this is meant to address projects that may affect changes in water flow, such as river diversions and other actions designed to restore the natural hydrology of marshes and wetlands. Those types of projects could lead to short- and long-term changes in the salinity of nearshore waters. Exposure of dolphins to freshwater conditions (salinity <10 ppt) over an extended period of time can compromise epidermal integrity (as evidenced by skin lesions), alter blood chemistry, cause physiological stress, and contribute to secondary infections leading in some cases to death (Wilson et al. 1999; Colbert et al. 1999; Reif et al. 2006; Holyoake et al. 2010; Rowe et al. 2010; Mullin et al. 2015). Low-salinity conditions can also affect the distribution of dolphin prey (Barros and Odell 1990). Besides affecting salinity levels, projects designed to restore marshes and wetlands could have deleterious effects on marine mammals, as summarized in previous letters[1]. Formal consultation with both the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) must therefore be conducted to identify appropriate mitigation measures associated with such projects, in compliance with the incidental take provisions of the Marine Mammal Protection Act and Endangered Species Act.

[1] See Commission letters dated 8 July 2013 and 28 September 2015.

Therefore, the Commission reiterates its previous recommendation that the Council consult with NMFS regarding the potential for incidental taking of bottlenose dolphins and with FWS regarding potential effects on manatees (and other endangered species under FWS's jurisdiction) and designated critical habitat associated with inshore and nearshore restoration activities that may be funded or directed by the Council.

It is anticipated that consultation could result in requirements to monitor the effectiveness of project-related mitigation and also potential effects on marine mammals and other species. Such monitoring would be useful to inform future decision-making as part of an adaptive management approach to Gulf restoration. Consistent with the Council's stated emphasis on applying the best available scientific information, it is imperative that monitoring programs associated with any large-scale restoration project be developed in close coordination with other state, federal, and private programs involved in funding or directing Gulf restoration projects (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2016). The Commission commends the Council's recognition of the need for greater coordination and collaboration between Council members and with other funding sources. Coordination and collaboration efforts should include those agencies with expertise in monitoring marine mammal populations, especially those populations that were injured as a result of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and for which recovery is a high priority. The Commission recommends that monitoring the potential effects of large-scale restoration activities be conducted in close collaboration with NMFS and FWS.

I hope these comments and recommendations are helpful to the Council. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Rebecca J. Lent

Rebecca J. Lent, Ph.D.
Executive Director

Enclosure

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