

**TESTIMONY OF
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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER AND WILDLIFE
COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS
U.S. SENATE**

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, good afternoon and thank you very much for this opportunity to discuss S.1311, the Gulf of Mexico Restoration and Protection Act. I am Bryon Griffith, Director of the Gulf of Mexico Program, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The Gulf of Mexico Program is a regional geographic initiative of the EPA located in coastal Mississippi, on the Federal campus of the NASA Stennis Space Center, strategically centered on the Northern Gulf Coast.

I would like to address several issues with the Subcommittee today. First, I'd like to briefly describe why the Gulf of Mexico is at risk and the important role of EPA's Gulf of Mexico Program (Gulf Program or Program); second, talk about the Program itself; third, highlight the excellent working relationship that the Program has with the Gulf of Mexico Governors' Alliance, and finally, describe the pressing needs and challenges facing us in the Gulf coastal region.

The Northern Gulf of Mexico – Ecosystem at Risk

The Gulf of Mexico is the ninth largest water body in the world, and to the north borders five states -- Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida. It teems with sea life,

from shrimp to unexplored deep-water corals living thousands of feet below the surface. The size of the Gulf, along with its unique ecological diversity, has led to the creation of many state and national parks and habitat and wildlife preserves. Its coastal areas contain 30% of the wetlands in the continental United States, and are home to diverse natural resources, including nesting waterfowl, sea turtles, fisheries and shellfisheries. These resources are supported by the abundant bays, estuaries, tidal flats, barrier islands, hard- and softwood forests, and mangrove forests.

Much of the coastal economy is tied to its natural resources. In 2006, the Gulf coast's GDP (Gross Domestic Product) was \$2.2 trillion, its economy critically supporting over 20 million jobs, with 620,000 jobs or more tied to tourism and recreation alone. The Gulf is critically important nationally as well as regionally, producing 52% of the U.S. crude oil and 54% of its natural gas. Its waters produce 1.2 billion pounds of fish and shellfish annually, and it is also home to six of the top ten leading shipping ports in the U.S.

However, coastal wetlands and barrier islands are disappearing due to actions taken throughout the Mississippi River Basin to enhance shipping, control flooding, expand commercial interests and oil and gas development, and because of storms, subsidence and other natural factors. The Gulf hypoxic zone is one of the largest in the world, and has created an area on average the size of Connecticut that often cannot support marine life because of low oxygen levels in the bottom waters. With the population of the Gulf coastal areas predicted to increase by 10% from 2006 to 2015, the Gulf of Mexico and its ecosystems will experience further impacts from coastal development, industrial and

commercial pressures, and continued transport of nutrients down the Mississippi River from agriculture and other point sources upstream. To add to the challenges, there is also the possibility of more frequent and severe tropical storms and hurricanes.

EPA's Gulf of Mexico Program

EPA's Gulf of Mexico Program was created in 1988 and over the years has focused on strong partnerships and targeted strategic action. In the twenty-one years since the Program began, we have issued over \$42 million in grants for projects ranging from the development of state nutrient reduction strategies, to environmental education and outreach for underserved students. For example, with funding from the Gulf Program, the State of Mississippi is developing a draft nutrient reduction strategy for the Mississippi Delta – the primary area for row-crop agriculture. This strategy includes pilot projects with specific nutrient reduction targets, monitoring, and estimates of ecological and economic benefits. In addition, the Gulf Program has helped protect over 30,000 acres of coastal habitat, and has contributed to development of the first-ever early-warning detection system for harmful algal blooms (HABs), or red tide, a condition exacerbated by excess nutrients that poses a risk to both human and marine health. We have helped improve the quality of a number of coastal freshwater systems to the point where they are no longer designated as “impaired waters.” We have also addressed the need for consistent, readily-available data, integrating Federal and State habitat information in support of States' decision-making. These are just a few of the many successful actions that the Gulf Program has contributed to over the years.

Collaboration with the Gulf of Mexico Alliance

A cornerstone of the Gulf Program's efforts is its relationship with the Gulf of Mexico Alliance – a collaborative effort among Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida to protect the Gulf of Mexico and its ecosystems. Since the formation of the Alliance in 2004 by the Governors of the five Gulf States, EPA's Gulf Program has served as the foundation for the partnership's technical and financial assistance. We also co-lead the collaboration of the 13 member Federal Working Group with NOAA and the Department of Interior. In June, 2009, the Gulf Alliance issued its **Action Plan II**, which outlines ninety-seven specific activities in six priority areas designed to achieve real improvements in water quality and ecosystem protection. Expert staff from the Gulf Program serve as co-leads of the priority areas, and at the same time manage grants that address the activities outlined in **Action Plan II**. The success of the Alliance in achieving virtually 100% of the objectives of its first **Action Plan**, along with the excellent working relationship among the Alliance, EPA's Gulf of Mexico Program, and other Federal agencies, resulted in the Joint Ocean Commission recognizing the collaboration as a "model for ocean governance alliances nationally." We note that the administration has embarked upon an effort, through the establishment of the interagency Ocean Policy Task Force, to create a national policy for the ocean, coasts, and the Great Lakes, which is to be complemented with a recommended framework for coastal and marine spatial planning. EPA's Gulf of Mexico program embodies the science-based approach envisioned in the Task Force's Interim Report as well as holistic coordination and collaboration with regional entities.

The Challenges of Protecting and Restoring the Gulf of Mexico

The Gulf of Mexico Program has been very effective in supporting the growth and activities of the Gulf of Mexico Alliance, and in improving wetlands condition and water quality in targeted areas. However, the region is experiencing changes faster and on a larger scale than any other U.S. coastal region. A nearly enclosed shallow sub-tropical sea, the Gulf ecosystem is vulnerable to small changes in temperature, salinity and sea-level rise. Wetlands, along with their wildlife habitat, are being lost in coastal Louisiana alone at the rate of 25-30 square miles per year. Barrier islands are disappearing with the passage of each coastal storm. These rapidly evolving physical changes, coupled with the impacts of excess nutrients transported down more than 150 rivers spanning the thirty-one states draining to the Mississippi River Basin make it difficult to imagine tackling these problems tomorrow with yesterday's technologies and practices. The challenge facing the Gulf Program is to evolve at an appropriate pace to successfully support the Gulf States' capacity to respond. To succeed, the Program will have to continue to achieve extremely high and effective leveraging of the projects and activities implementing the Region's **Action Plan II**.

EPA strongly supports the restoration and protection goals of Senate Bill 1311, which supports our work leveraging partners and resources to enhance this valuable coastal resource. While we have concerns about the authorization levels, we look forward to working with you to find the best way forward to protect the Gulf of Mexico.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, for this opportunity to speak with you today, and I welcome any questions you may have.