

From destruction, restoration...a message from Comm. Baker on RESTORE grants

On the night of April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig exploded while operating in the Gulf of Mexico about 40 miles offshore. The blast killed eleven individuals working on the rig, none of whom were ever found. A number of crewmembers were injured and all required rescue. Despite efforts to save the rig, she slipped beneath the surface on the morning of April 22 and sank to the ocean floor five thousand feet below.

As news of the tragedy spread, so did an oil slick emanating from a broken riser thousands of feet below the former location of Deepwater Horizon. When the blowout preventer failed, the riser buckled and split causing a stream of oil to flow freely into the surrounding Gulf. For 87 days, the world watched millions of barrels of crude oil spew into our Gulf as round-the-clock news coverage turned a horrific tragedy into the ultimate environmental reality television show. By the time the well was plugged the damage was done, and it was catastrophic.

The irony in this disaster is that we now have more than \$1 billion in dedicated funding to help our coastal ecosystem and economy in Texas. The funds are driven by criminal penalties, civil penalties and natural resource damage assessments to be paid by the responsible parties, BP, Transocean, MOEX and Anadarko.

So far about \$150 million in Deepwater Horizon-related funding has been awarded in Texas for ecosystem restoration, conservation and research projects. A few highlights include (1) conserving the 17,351 acre Powderhorn Ranch on Matagorda Bay, (2) creating a center of excellence made up of a consortium including the University of Houston, Rice and NASA to focus on safely exploring deep and ultra-deepwater for future oil and gas reserves, and (3) focused land acquisitions to enhance the Bahia Grande near South Padre Island. There are also projects that restore historical rookeries, aid sea turtles, provide better water quality to our bays and cap old, abandoned oil wells.

Congress, recognizing both the damage to the environment and our coastal economy, passed what has come to be known as the RESTORE Act, under which eighty percent of the civil and administrative penalties associated with the Deepwater Horizon tragedy are redirected into a newly created Restoration Trust Fund to be used for the benefit of the Gulf Coast. A proposed settlement with BP includes about \$400 million that will be deposited into this special federal fund to be used in Texas for both ecosystem restoration *and* economic development—including tourism, seafood marketing, job creation, community resilience and infrastructure. An additional \$1.32 billion will be placed in the fund for use by the Ecosystem Restoration Council, of which I am a member, which is charged under the RESTORE Act with awarding almost one-third of the trust fund for additional environmental projects across the Gulf.

Former Governor Perry and now Governor Abbott have appointed me to oversee the implementation of the RESTORE Act in Texas. On January 15th of this year, we issued a request for grant applications in order to award the first \$57 million in RESTORE funds that can be used for both environmental and economic projects along the Texas coast. We will keep the application window open until April 15, 2016, and I encourage all coastal Texans who are interested in utilizing these funds to visit our website www.restorethetexascoast.org to learn more. The website contains information on all streams of funding associated with the Deepwater

Horizon disaster. We also require that all applications for funding be submitted through an online portal that can be found on the site.

As so many of the traditional songs and poems reflecting on the ocean find meaning in the idea of rising from the deep or in the calming of the waves, I have to think that the great theme of this tragedy is from destruction, restoration. We cannot change the past. But we can make the best of it. Here, ironically, a devastating environmental tragedy has resulted in a once in a lifetime opportunity to do something special on our coast. This opportunity is important not only to the tourists, hunters and anglers who come for the experience of the Texas coast or the numerous species that rely on a healthy ecosystem and sustainable development, but also for other Americans who have never seen the Gulf but nevertheless feel its economic impact on a daily basis. Their cars are fueled by gas refined in Texas. Their homes are heated in the winter by gas delivered through pipelines originating on our coast. They enjoy great seafood and oysters from our waters. They use plastic containers derived from petroleum in a plant in Texas. And let's not forget about the massive economic impact of our coastal ports, from which cargo is exported to foreign ports all over the globe thereby sustaining jobs and creating billions in economic value.

As stewards of our natural environment, we bear the great responsibility of ensuring the success of this restoration opportunity, and we owe it to the next generation to manage the Gulf of Mexico in a sustainable way. We are blessed beyond measure to live adjacent to such a magnificent body of water.

--Toby Baker, Commissioner, TCEQ

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