Coastal Wetlands Reviews: Gulf Coast Region

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- Today’s presentation is just an overview. If you have questions please refer to the report and follow up with your agencies’ leads for more information.
- Started with looking at national status and trends updates and separating out just the coastal watersheds. Coastal areas were still losing area. Currently doing another look, with new report coming out by end of the year.
- Objectives are to 1) give an overview of the project, 2) highlight key findings (stressors and needs), and 3) focus on Gulf issues and solicit input. Will be taking a poll and have some discussion questions.
- Coastal wetland review process started with selecting 7 focal watersheds, and then followed a 3-step process:
  1) Looked at existing information about wetland loss in those watersheds. Prepared summary presentations on trends, gaps and needs, and techniques being tried.
2) Convened stakeholder groups to solicit additional information about what’s happening in their watersheds.
3) Prepared a series of reports that are available online.
   - Two Gulf focus watersheds: Mississippi Coastal Watershed and East & West Galveston Bay Watershed
   - Looked at wetland loss in terms of both extent and quality. Used C-CAP data to analyze loss between 1996 and 2006.
   - Total loss for GoMex is about 26,000 acres per year. Louisiana loss is about half of this.
   - Major stressors: Climate change, development, hydrologic change, shoreline hardening, cumulative impacts, agriculture/silviculture, and limitations of regulations
   - Website identifies tools / techniques for managing stressors

Gulf-specific information:
- Stressors most commonly identified were development (commercial and residential, lot of discussion about shoreline hardening), hurricanes and storms, SLR, ag/silviculture, hydrologic alterations (building levees, dredging, water diversions, channelization), oil and gas spills, limitations of regulations.
- Galveston Bay focal area. East and West watersheds. C-CAP showed total loss of about 12,000 acres; over half to development, with most of that attributed to growth of the Houston-Galveson metro area.
- Top issues identified at Galveston meeting were development, non-point pollution, and shoreline hardening. Interesting discussion and fieldtrip related to the limitations of regulation (e.g. exemptions in the CWA, and lack of jurisdiction over isolated wetlands – saw examples of prairie pothole wetlands that are not jurisdictional.)
- Concerns about hydrologic alterations, including water withdrawals.
- Coastal Mississippi focal area: 3 coastal counties and portions of 3 counties inland. About 3900 acres lost.
- Major stressors: development (post-Katrina rush, non-point pollution, interruption of fire regimes), shoreline armoring, hydrologic modifications, SLR and storm events, limitations of regulations (state tidal wetland laws aren’t able to address the gaps in federal jurisdiction in CWA; ag/silviculture exemptions in CWA.)

Major Gaps and Needs
- **Communication and coordination:** includes outreach and education. An over-arching need addressed in each region and relates to / an umbrella over all the gaps. Local officials were identified as key audience for communication and coordination; they need more background so when a project is submitted they know if a permit is required.
- **Living shorelines:** Need to provide incentives and promote use of living shorelines. Need to educate homeowners and contractors. Need more regional general permits (Gulf is making progress on this – USACE has regional general permit for AL, and are developing one for MS.)
- **Streamline wetland restoration process:** Remove regulatory and procedural measures related to beneficial re-use of dredge material. Are efforts underway to streamline.
- **Ag and forestry BMPs:** Need more oversight over exemptions. Full implementation of BMPs, and more monitoring to be sure being followed. Education/outreach for farmers and local officials. Technical assistance and training essential to get BMPs applied.
- **Mitigation effectiveness:** Concerned whether really effective and compensating for wetlands loss. Need to monitor to be sure are functioning. Need to make sure the compensation occurs in watershed where impact occurs, plan at watershed scale.
• **Regulatory support:** From jurisdictional issues to exemptions to need for resources to strengthen compliance programs. Need more resources, long-term geospatially-based monitoring, and mapping.

• **Jurisdiction issues:** There are gaps in jurisdiction (e.g. prairie pothole wetlands), and confusion about jurisdiction. Need to clarify current legal situation, and do research on the “nexus” between isolated wetlands and navigable waters.

• **Data:** Need for central repository of data with both mapping and permitting data. Needs to be accessible and understandable so public can understand.

• **Watershed Management:** Lot of support for this as a vehicle for more effective wetlands protection. Need to incorporate wetlands protection in a watershed management approach that includes land use planning. Need more public involvement. Use special area management plans.

**Voting on Priority Needs, Discussion**

• Participants were asked to vote for top two needs:
  - Watershed management and regulatory support were top two. Communication and coordination a close third

• Participants were asked to answer several discussion questions online.

• Dave Evans of EPA spoke to the interagency coastal wetlands workgroup
  - Culmination of several years of work. Interagency workgroup has met monthly, with up to 7 agencies participating (EPA, USFWS, NOAA, USACE, USGS, FHA, and USDA.)
  - First couple years work focused on completing the reviews. Now trying to get our arms around how want to proceed from here. As much as we’ve learned, still many important questions that need more in-depth analysis to answer.
  - One action planning is to do more in-depth analysis and uncover the details behind wetland losses in specific watersheds. Galveston is one of the four.
  - We know that in some cases, wetlands people would consider important to protect are not protected by the CWA. In other cases the wetlands are covered by the CWA but activities are not covered (e.g. silviculture using BMPs.)
  - Have committed to working in interagency process to see ways living shorelines could be put on more equal footing with other measures re: permitting. Will also work with USACE and USDA to look at what information exists on forestry BMPs that we could better communicate so landowners understand what activities are subject to permitting, and what BMPs they should be utilizing. If BMPs are being applied, forested wetlands shouldn’t be converting to uplands.
  - See potential for more wetland protection if it’s explicitly part of watershed plans.
  - Appreciate everyone’s participation today.

Arlene asks how people might use the information and about low-hanging fruit.

• Some “high hanging fruit” would be to update the CWA jurisdictions of the U.S. – high priority of EPA and USACE, and stay tuned.

• Between NRDA, RESTORE, etc., going to be a lot of work going on in the Gulf in the next 20 years.

• Might be possible topic for GOMA all hands meeting?

Chat boxes will remain open for a few minutes, and results will be shared. Todd will send around the list of contacts for the agencies.
Polling Results

1. Can you tell us about your activities (both PITs and work of your respective agencies and partners in the Gulf) that are being undertaken to address these top priority gaps and needs?

Phil Turnipseed: There is still a major gap in data collection both hydrological and ecological in the GoM.

Douglas Jacobson: We are continually working with the USACE districts and partners to improve permitting requirements. Our goals don’t always match those of our partners, and the effectiveness of mitigation needs to be assured.

Russ Beard: We are funding DISL on projects in watershed management related to water quality, nutrients, stressors and living shorelines

Todd Davison: HCRT and EIA Teams have many related complementary underway. Suggest a coordination meeting at GOMA All Hands on use and complements to the report

John Bowie: MS developed a Sediment Management WO rkgroup about 3 years ago and they developed a Master Plan for beneficially re-using dredged sediments. The focus was on developing receiving locaitons geographically located along the coastline to ensure there was a locaiton located within a cost-effective distance form the dredging aciton that could re-use the sediments. MS established legislation that required sediments form projects >2,500 CY to be beneficially re-used rather than disposed offshore or upland. Basically establishing them as state resources.

John Bowie: Consider utilizing the COE “buyout” program concept as a means of allowing wetlands mitigation to include conservaition of lands in the velocity zones along the coast line

Kate Spear: USGS National Wetlands Research Center and EPA Gulf of Mexico Program are developing an Emergent Wetlands Status and Trends Report, using aerial photography and NWI classification standards, as one of the GOMA Ecosystems Integration and Assessment PIT Action Items. The report
covers the northern GOM and 8 individual estuaries in closer detail. This report will help address communication, coordination and data gaps/needs by providing scientists, managers and policy makers with valuable baseline information on emergent wetlands in the Gulf.

**John Bowie**: Consider tax incentives for landowners as a means of conserving and preserving lands within the zone that is projected to be inundated by future sea level rise. This would go a long way to address resiliency issues also

**John Bowie**: Todd - thanks for the comment abot my typing - I'm done for now

2. *With the advent of NRDA, RESTORE Act and other major ecosystem restoration activities in the Gulf, what are opportunities for using the information in the report or building on information in the report?*

**Todd Davison**: The focus area studies in Galveston and MS/AL provide enough specifics for project formulation

**douglas jacobson**: Our RESTORE/NRDA reps have read the report, but there is no requirement in those acts to address those needs. Also, some of the findings won't be addressed, such as regulatory effectiveness.

**Miles Croom**: Information in the report will be useful in evaluating habitat stressors and vulnerabilities for purposes of assessing impacts of projects proposed under NRDA, RESTORE, and other existing programs, to understand and weigh impacts such as habitat conversions (i.e., how to evaluate trade-offs in ecosystem services when a project changes habitat from one type to another), and how these impacts and tradeoffs should be weighed in an ecosystem/watershed context

**Phil Turnipseed**: The report serves as an indicator, but not as an overall assessment. The Mississippi River Delta, the Chenier Plain, the Gulf Barrier Islands, and many coastal environments were omitted.

**russ beard**: Whether or not agencies restore, mitigate, or manage retreat where appropriate

3. *Based on your experiences, what advice or input can you provide to the Interagency Coastal Wetlands Work Group about addressing these gaps and needs?*

**Phil Turnipseed**: There needs to be a concerted effort to improve, increase, and develop data collection in the GoM.

**russ beard**: Concur with integrated data collection and data transparency among academics, NGO's, fed state et al

**Bill O'Beirne**: Need to develop values for ecosystem services that can be introduced into the planning and permitting arenas to counter the economic benefits argument for development. Also they could be useful in developing arguments for what is actually the highest and best use of a particular piece of property that may decrease the threat or likelihood of successful takings cases.