

**Comprehensive Plan  
To  
Restore Walton County's Ecosystems and  
Economy**

**Approved by  
Walton County Board of County Commissioners  
February 25, 2014**

## **I. Introduction**

Walton County believes that it is in the County's best interest to develop a Comprehensive Plan (Plan) designed to facilitate efforts to restore local ecosystems and economies impacted as a result of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. This Plan provides a framework to define and implement Walton County's efforts to restore, protect and revitalize its ecosystems and economy.

This draft is the initial version of a Plan which will change over time and guide the County in its restoration efforts, decisions and actions. The Plan establishes the County's goals for recovery and provides a process to select restoration projects and programs for funding consideration as funds become available from the RESTORE Act or any other sources. Over the next few years the continued development and implementation of this Plan will be a process leading to countywide comprehensive, multi-objective restoration based on the best available science.

This Plan will be more completely and fully developed with input from the Walton County Board of County Commissioners, the Walton County Local RESTORE Act Committee and the public, and shall not be considered final until sufficient input has been obtained by each of the above. The Board of County Commissioners will determine when such sufficient input has been obtained and will, at a public meeting, determine the final form and content of this Comprehensive Plan.

## **II. OVERVIEW**

Walton County's twenty six miles of Gulf coastline and associated inland waters and waterways are vital to the County's economy and way of life. The extraordinary beaches, recreational activities, tourism, rich cultural heritage and vast conservation lands are integral components in the ecological and economical health of the County, all of which were negatively impacted by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The negative impacts to the above mentioned components resulted in further economic declines in those noncoastal County areas which provide substantial support to the coastal areas and those traveling to and from such areas. According to the RESTORE Act's Regional Council, the Gulf of Mexico has experienced numerous water quality problems resulting from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill including excess nutrients, hypoxia, altered sediment resources, pathogens, mercury, oil, dispersants and other pollutants. Living coastal and marine systems are showing signs of stress, such as depleted species population and degraded habitats. Storm risk, land loss, depletion of natural resources, compromised water quality and quantity, and sea-level rise are imperiling coastal communities' natural defenses and ability to respond to natural and man-made disruptions. These problems

not only endanger the natural systems but also the economic vitality of Walton County, the Gulf Coast region and the entire nation.

The RESTORE Act was passed by Congress on June 29, 2012 and signed into law by President Obama on July 6, 2012. The act envisions restoring the long-term health and valuable natural ecosystems and economy of the Gulf Coast region, including Walton County. The RESTORE Act dedicates 80 percent of any civil and administrative penalties paid under the Clean Water Act, after the date of enactment, by responsible parties in connection with the Deepwater Horizon oil spill to the Trust Fund for ecosystem restoration, economic recovery and tourism promotion in the Gulf Coast region, including Walton County. This effort is in addition to the restoration of natural resources injured by the spill which will be accomplished by other entities pursuant to the Oil Pollution Act. It is the intent of this Plan to maximize the County's ability to capture significant portions of these funds.

Figure 1, below, describes the five "pots" of funds created by the RESTORE Act. The pot entitled "Direct Component" directs funds to each impacted state, with a majority of Florida's share being passed directly to Gulf Coast Counties. The Local Restore Act Committee will receive, evaluate, and recommend projects for this funding source to the Walton County Board of County Commissioners. Each of the other pots are available to Walton County, based on a yet to be determined set of criteria. This Plan is designed to support Walton County's efforts to secure not only RESTORE Act funding, but any source which may be available as a result of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill.



**Figure 1: Allocation of RESTORE Act Funding**

*Geographic Scope of this Plan*

The intent of this Plan is to facilitate the recovery efforts of Walton County’s ecosystems and economy and recognizes the importance of including the entirety of the County, but also understands that certain efforts can only be successful when considered as a regional effort. The County recognizes that upland, estuarine and marine habitats are intrinsically connected, and therefore, it is the intent of this Plan to provide discretion to include neighboring Counties and communities, when doing so provides the best opportunity for goal attainment, forming appropriate partnerships to maximize successes in funding requests.

*Commitment to Science-Based Decision Making*

Environmental and ecological decisions made pursuant to this Plan will be based on the best available science and this Plan will evolve over time to incorporate new science, information,

and changing conditions. The County will coordinate with the scientific community to improve the decision making process.

*Commitment to Engagement, Inclusion and Transparency*

As the County continues the development of this Plan and the ultimate selection and funding of restoration projects, it will seek broad participation and input from the diverse stakeholders who live, work, invest and play in Walton County as well as those who impact Walton County, such as those that are a part of the Choctawhatchee River Basin, but outside of the geographic confine of the County. The County is committed to including the public in this process, welcoming comments, questions and suggestions as they relate to activities associated with this Comprehensive Plan, its development and implementation. The County will actively seek out and develop strategic partnerships and collaboration on innovative restoration projects, programs and approaches.

*Commitment to Leveraging Resources and Partnerships*

The County will aggressively develop partnerships and welcome additional public and private financial and technical support to maximize successes. Such partnerships will add value through integration of public and private sector resources, skills, knowledge and expertise.

*Commitment to Delivering Results and Measuring Impacts*

The County recognizes the importance of measuring outcomes and impacts, to the greatest extent possible, in order to achieve tangible results and demonstrate that funds are invested in the most meaningful way, achieving maximum value and benefit.

**III. GOALS**

It is Walton County's intent to restore, revitalize and protect the County's environment and economy through the implementation of this Comprehensive Plan. The County recognizes that ecosystem restoration and protection investments will also improve economic prosperity and quality of life. The impacts of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill clearly demonstrated the reliance of Walton County on tourism as its main economic engine. Understanding that certain natural and man-made disruptions and/or disasters can devastate a tourist based economy, a diversified economy, focusing on the development of economic sectors that are much less likely to suffer the negative consequences of such disasters is vital to the sustainability of Walton County's economy. The County acknowledges that coordinated action with stakeholders and

partners is important to successfully restore and sustain the health of the County's environment and economy. This coordination is particularly important due to the diverse funding sources and decision making bodies which are making investments in the restoration effort.

To provide the overarching framework for a local, yet integrated and coordinated, approach for County restoration efforts and to help guide and focus County actions regarding project development and ultimately funding requests, the County adopts the following goals:

1. ***Restore, Protect and Conserve Habitat*** – Restore, protect and conserve the health, diversity and resilience of key coastal, riverine, estuarine and marine habitats, including rivers, bays, bayous and coastal dune lakes.
2. ***Restore, Revitalize, and Diversify the County's Economy*** – Enhance and protect the sustainability and resiliency of Walton County's economy, working to diversify the County's economic base.
3. ***Replenish and Protect Living Coastal and Marine Resources*** – Restore and protect healthy, diverse and sustainable living coastal and marine resources.
4. ***Enhance Community Resilience*** – Build upon and sustain communities with capacity to adapt to short and long term changes.
5. ***Restore Water Quality*** – Restore and protect water quality of the County's fresh, estuarine and marine waters, including rivers, bays, bayous and coastal dune lakes.

To achieve these goals, the County will support ecosystem restoration projects which will enhance local communities by giving people desirable places to live, work and play, while creating opportunities for new and existing businesses of all sizes, especially those dependent on natural resources and the environment. Ecosystem restoration activities can also directly support the County's ability to withstand, prevent and quickly recover from future natural or man-made disruptions, including promoting natural storm buffers and other ecosystem restoration activities that produce environmental benefits and reduce economic loss from storm surge flooding to residential, public, industrial and commercial infrastructure. The second of these goals focuses on reviving, diversifying and supporting a sustainable local economy, ensuring expenditures of RESTORE Act and other associated funds can be considered in the context of comprehensive restoration, supporting efforts to diversify the County's

economic base by facilitating job creation and growth in sectors less likely to be impacted by natural or man-made disruptions and/or disasters.

Walton County recognizes that developing strategic partnerships is vital to successfully restoring and sustaining the ecological and economic health of the County. The County will coordinate, as appropriate, with state and federal agencies (including Department of Defense), other states and entities working to achieve common restoration goals, working collectively toward an integrated vision for comprehensive restoration. The County will coordinate with other intergovernmental bodies, nongovernmental organizations and other restoration initiatives to ensure that efforts are complementary and mutually beneficial. Specifically, the County recognizes similar work undertaken by the Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) Trustees, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and the North American Wetlands Conservation Fund (NAWCF). Below is a brief overview of each of these efforts:

**Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA)** – Assessing injury to natural resources and the services they provide as well as the lost use of such resources. Damages for natural resource injury will include the cost of restoring, rehabilitating, replacing or acquiring the equivalent of the injured natural resources; the diminution in value of those natural resources pending restoration and the reasonable cost of assessing those injuries as a result of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

**National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF)** – Established by Congress in 1984, NFWF will receive over \$2.5 Billion throughout the next five years from the Transocean (January 2013) and BP (November 2012) criminal plea agreements with the United States. NFWF has stated that these funds will be used “to support projects that remedy harm to natural resources (habitats, species) where there has been injury to, or destruction of, loss of, or loss of use of those resources resulting from the oil spill.”

**National Academy of Sciences (NAS)** – NAS received \$500 million from the Transocean and BP criminal plea agreements. These funds are to be used for human health and environmental protection, including oil spill prevention and response in the Gulf region.

**North American Wetlands Conservation Fund (NAWCF)** – NAWCF received \$100 million from the BP criminal plea agreement for wetlands restoration, conservation and projects benefiting migratory birds.

It is Walton County's intent to work with its partners to advance common goals, avoid duplication and maximize the benefits of each of the above entities to advance such goals.

#### **IV. Objectives**

All activities, projects, methods and procedures appropriate to enhance the health and resilience of Walton County ecosystems, as measured in terms of the physical, biological, or chemical properties of the ecosystem, or the services it provides, and to strengthen its ability to support the diverse economies, communities and cultures of the County. It includes activities that initiate or accelerate the recovery of an ecosystem with respect to its health, integrity and sustainability. It also includes protecting and conserving ecosystems so they can continue to serve as buffers from hurricanes, tropical storms and other disasters, support robust economies and assist in mitigating and adapting to the impacts of climate change (per Executive Order 13554).

Walton County will select and request funding for projects and programs that restore and protect the natural resources, ecosystems, water quality, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches, bays, coastal dune lakes, inland waterways, tributaries, and wetlands of the County. Further, the County will select and request funding for projects which provide for development and protection of a resilient, diversified, and sustainable economy. These Objectives are not listed in any particular order and the County does not anticipate that funding will be equally distributed based on project type. Restoration projects and activities may achieve multiple Objectives simultaneously, with those which do receiving greater consideration. The following list of projects and programs is meant to be descriptive and not limiting or wholly inclusive.

**1. Restore, Enhance and Protect Habitats-** Restore, enhance and protect the functionality, resiliency and sustainability of coastal, freshwater, riverine, estuarine, wildlife and marine habitats. These may include beaches, dunes, coastal wetlands, rivers, coastal dune lakes, coastal forests, pine savannahs, submerged aquatic vegetation, oyster reefs, fishing reefs, and shallow and deep water corals.

Types of projects and programs that could be implemented under this objective include those which provide for the restoration, enhancement, creation and protection of important coastal freshwater, estuarine and marine habitats including the removal of invasive species. Protection and conservation projects may be implemented through active management, acquisition, voluntary management agreements, protected area management, perpetual management, conservation easements and other conservation activities.

**2. Promote Community Resilience and Economic Sustainability** – Build and sustain Walton County’s communities’ capacity to adapt to short and long term natural and man-made hazards, particularly increased flood risks associated with sea-level rise and environmental stressors. Promote ecosystem restoration that enhances community resilience through the re-establishment of nonstructural, natural buffers against storms and flooding. Endorse economic development projects which provide for job creation and growth, developing new and protecting existing economic opportunities which offer diversity of the County’s economic base.

Promote projects and programs that support community through economic growth, workforce development, and job creation. The types of projects and programs that could be implemented under this objective may address: risk assessments; natural resource Planning and natural resource recovery Planning with locally driven solutions; and long term land use. Planning as it relates to the management and sustainability of coastal resources; acquisition and/or preservation of undeveloped lands in coastal high hazard areas; nonstructural storm and surge protection; design of incentive based mitigation programs; engagement with and among local communities and other measures that build community resiliency through ecosystem restoration.

**3. Protect and Restore Living Coastal and marine Resources** – Restore and protect healthy, diverse and sustainable living coastal and marine resources including finfish, shellfish, birds, mammals, reptiles, coral, and deep benthic communities.

The types of projects anticipated under this objective include those which address recovery of threatened and endangered species, overfishing and bycatch, improved fisheries assessments, sustainable resource management of commercially and recreationally important activities (such as fishing, hunting and wildlife watching), increased resource stocks, invasive and nuisance species management and removal, enforcement and other protective measures.

**4. Restore and Enhance Natural Processes and Shorelines** – Restore and enhance ecosystem resilience, sustainability and natural defenses through the restoration of natural coastal, estuarine and riverine process and/or the restoration of natural shorelines.

The types of projects and programs that could be implemented under this objective may include: removal of barriers to improve freshwater inflow and fish passage; improved sediment management; restoration of coastal wetlands, restoration of eroded shorelines, river diversions and other types of hydrologic restoration; natural ridge restoration; implementation of living shoreline techniques; and other restoration techniques that address natural processes and shorelines.

**5. Promote Natural Resource Stewardship and Environmental Education** – Promote and enhance natural resource stewardship through environmental education efforts that include formal and informal educational opportunities, professional development and training, communication and actions for all ages.

The types of projects and programs that could be implemented under this objective may include; environmental stewardship and education programs tied to Walton County’s resources that encourage and coordinate the use of existing environmental education and outreach networks and institutions; establish a more effective relationship between research and education communities; and provide meaningful hands on ecosystem education that includes local, cultural, environmental and economic values with the belief that education will encourage action toward a healthier Walton County. Projects and programs which promote natural resource stewardship and environmental education should be tied to ecosystem restoration and/or protection.

**6. Improve Science-Based Decision Making Process** – To improve the ability of the Local Restore Committee and Board of County Commissioners to utilize science, where appropriate, as a component of the decision making process.

Types of projects and programs that may be included in this objective are those which implement or improve science based adaptive management and project level and regional ecosystem monitoring , including the coordination and interoperability of ecosystem monitoring programs; regional database and expert systems used to warehouse ecosystem data; improved ecosystem restoration outcome and impact measurement and monitoring information gained and address the critical uncertainties related to restoration to adaptively manage and inform County decision making processes and procedures related to ecosystem funding requests.

## **V. Evaluation Criteria**

Walton County understands that those charged with making decisions regarding the approval of projects and the appropriation of funding for projects will utilize the best available science and give the highest priority to projects and programs which fall into specific project criteria. As Walton County considers projects and programs for which to request funding, the following criteria will be applied:

1. Projects that are projected to make the greatest contribution to restoring and protecting the natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches, coastal wetlands, bays, bayous, coastal dune lakes and inland waterways in Walton County.
2. Projects that protect and/or promote the economic vitality and sustainability of the County by promoting job creation and growth in areas which diversify the County's economic base, providing a buffer against the impacts of natural or man-made disruptions.
3. Projects contained in existing Walton County Comprehensive Plan, Capital Improvement Plan or any other existing approved County Plan which advances the restoration and protection of natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches, coastal wetlands, bays, bayous, coastal dune lakes and inland waterways of the County.
4. Projects that restore the long-term resiliency of the natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches, coastal wetlands, bays, bayous, rivers, coastal dune lakes and inland waterways most impacted by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

## **VI. Project and Program Phases**

Walton County recognizes that there may be ecosystem and economic programs and projects that are ready for funding consideration. In addition to these projects and programs, the County will seek proposals that advance new ideas and approaches to ecosystem restoration but may not yet be ready for funding consideration. Consequently, in addition to considering proposals for project and program funding, the County will consider proposals for project and program Planning and/or project design and permitting. To accomplish this, the County will accept proposals that address one or more of three distinct phases- Planning, Technical Assistance and Implementation. All three phases may include projects and programs.

If a project is selected for either Planning or technical assistance funding, there is no assurance that funding for the implementation phase will be supported. Below are examples of activities which may be included in each phase:

**Planning** – Proposed activities may include the development of ecosystem restoration projects and programs; cost estimates, scientific foundation for the proposal and public engagement.

**Technical Assistance** – Proposed activities may include feasibility analysis, design, permitting, environmental review and compliance, evaluation and establishment of monitoring requirements and methods to report outcomes.

**Implementation** – Proposed activities may include construction, public outreach and education, measurement, evaluation and reporting of outcomes and impacts of restoration activities.

While focused on the long term recovery of the County, this approach will allow the County to support investment in specific actions, projects and programs that can be carried out in the near term to help ensure on the ground results to restore the overall health of County ecosystems.

The County has created a Local RESTORE Act Committee. This Committee is charged with receiving, evaluating, and recommending projects and programs requesting funds from the previously identified “pot one” funds. The County has provided the Local RESTORE Committee with criteria to utilize in its review of projects. The development of an application and application process for such projects is at the discretion of the Committee. The County will rely heavily on the Committee for funding requests for “pot one” funds. This County may enlist outside qualified technical expertise as necessary to assist in the process. While it is the intent of the Committee to fairly consider each request for funding, due to the uniqueness of “pot one” funds, the County may develop more or less restrictive guidelines for approving funding requests as presented by the Committee.

## **VII. Submittal of Proposals to the County**

Walton County will consider all projects submitted, regardless of where the project is initiated. It is anticipated that projects will be submitted by local governments, not for profit organizations, nongovernmental organizations and private concerns. The County will provide opportunities for the public to offer project and program ideas through various means. Coordination and collaboration with all stakeholders is encouraged, with the greatest consideration going to those programs and projects which have the greatest positive impact and the broadest support.

## **VIII. Funding Request Evaluation and Selection**

Proposals submitted for requested funding will be evaluated by the Committee as determined by the Board of County Commissioners, according to the following three step process:

**1. Eligibility Verification** – The County will verify the eligibility of each request to determine whether the proposed project is complete, supported by applicable eligible criteria and meets the minimum requirements under applicable law.

**2. Coordination Review** – In order to avoid duplication and maximize benefits from collaboration, the County will review eligible proposals for potential coordination opportunities within all County funding requests.

**3. Evaluation** – The County will evaluate proposals against evaluation criteria and will draw on experts as needed.

The County will determine through this process which proposals to support and forward to the appropriate funding source for consideration.

### **IX. Eligible Activities**

The RESTORE Act provides the scope of activities eligible for funding under the Spill Impact Component and may be considered universal regarding eligible projects. As described in the Act, these activities can include:

- Restoration and protection of the natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches, and coastal wetlands of the Gulf Coast region.
- Mitigation of damage to fish, wildlife, and natural resources.
- Implementation of a federally approved marine, coastal, or comprehensive conservation management Plan, including fisheries monitoring.
- Workforce development and job creation.
- Improvements to or on State parks located in coastal areas affected by the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill.
- Infrastructure projects benefitting the economy or ecosystem resources, including port infrastructure.
- Coastal flood protection and related infrastructure.
- Planning assistance.
- Administrative costs of complying with the Act.
- Promotion of tourism in the Gulf Coast region, including recreational fishing.

- Promotion of the consumption of seafood harvested from the Gulf Coast region.

## **X. Development of Proposals Requesting Funding**

In order to sufficiently consider each project or program requesting support for funding, the County suggests that such proposals include as many of the following as possible:

1. Amount of funding request
2. Start and completion dates
3. Specific mechanisms used to monitor and evaluate outcomes and impacts
4. Where applicable, demonstrate the application of the best available science
5. A statement of compliance with approved project categories
6. A demonstration of how the project/program contributes to the recovery of Walton County ecosystems and/or economy
7. A demonstration that the project/program is consistent with the goals and objectives of this Comprehensive Plan
8. A description of the financial controls and other financial integrity mechanisms to be utilized to assure the public, the County and the funding authority that funds will be/have been managed appropriately
9. A description of any certain or prospective collaborations or partnerships to be used or created through the support of the project/program
10. A description of any additional resources that will be leveraged, subject to the County's support for funding
11. A demonstration of a tangible return on investment
12. A demonstration that there will be no long-term unfunded recurring costs to the County to support the effort

The County will review each request for support and ultimately funding to ensure it is consistent with the goals and objectives provided in this Comprehensive Plan and to ensure all requirements are met.

#### **XI. Next Steps**

Due to ongoing litigation and other matters, there is a great deal of uncertainty surrounding the ultimate amount of funding, the timing of such funding and the process/procedure to request project funding. Walton County will continue to build more detail in this Plan and associated activities as existing uncertainties are resolved. The County anticipates future updates and addenda to this Plan to assure it provides the greatest support possible to Walton County's restoration and economic progress.