

NOAA Response to:

**Comments and Recommendations on the NOAA RESTORE
Act Science Program's Draft Science Plan**

A report of the:

Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Science
Program Advisory Working Group (RSPAWG)
of the NOAA Science Advisory Board (SAB)

Delivered in July 2014

November 2014

By

Dr. Kathryn Sullivan

NOAA Administrator and Under Secretary of Commerce

Introduction

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) appreciates the advice from the Science Advisory Board (SAB) in support of NOAA's Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Science, Observation, Monitoring and Technology Program ("NOAA RESTORE Act Science Program") on the program's draft Science Plan. We recognize the amount of work that went into developing the the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Science Program Advisory Working Group's (RSPAWG) comments and recommendations and we appreciate the dedication and responsiveness of the SAB and the RSPAWG to the draft Science Plan. The Science Plan, and by extension the NOAA RESTORE Act Science Program, is now stronger because of your expertise and commitment.

[The NOAA RESTORE Act Science Program](#) represents an opportunity and capacity to help integrate the disparate science efforts across the Gulf into something that considers the connectivity and entirety of the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem and advances our overall understanding of it as an integrated system. The RESTORE Act specifies that NOAA may expend funds for marine and estuarine research; marine and estuarine ecosystem monitoring and ocean observation; data collection and stock assessments; pilot programs for fishery independent data and reduction of exploitation of spawning aggregations; and cooperative research. In addition, the Act states that priority should be given to integrated, long-term projects that: (1) build on, or are coordinated with, related research activities; and (2) address current or anticipated marine ecosystem, fishery, or wildlife management information needs. The overarching goal of this program is to achieve holistic understanding of the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem.

NOAA initially developed a Science Plan Framework (December 2013) to communicate its intent, purpose, and rationale for execution of the NOAA RESTORE Act Science Program, according to its responsibilities under Section 1604 of the RESTORE Act. The Science Plan Framework provided the foundation for the development of a more robust Science Plan, a draft version of which was reviewed by and commented on by the SAB RSPAWG ahead of a planned release for public review and comment. When finalized, the Science Plan will guide program implementation.

The RSPAWG was established as a standing working group of the SAB to "provide informed regional advice to the NOAA RESTORE Act Science Program on Gulf of Mexico RESTORE-related ecosystem science and monitoring. It shall also formally coordinate between the multiple organizations conducting RESTORE-related science as prescribed by the RESTORE Act." Consistent with that charge, the RSPAWG held its first in-person meeting at the University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast Campus (USM-GCC), in Long Beach, MS, 18-20 June 2014, to review the draft Science Plan. The RSPAWG reviewed the plan and developed a

report, “Comments and Recommendations on the NOAA RESTORE Act Science Program Draft Science Plan.” The report was approved by the SAB and then transmitted to NOAA on behalf of the RSPA WG on 22 July 2014.

NOAA RESTORE Act Science Program staff reviewed the recommendations from the SAB’s RSPA WG and have revised the Science Plan accordingly. This NOAA response documents how the RSPA WG’s comments and recommendations were addressed. In addition, we explain several actions taken to improve the plan that were not in direct response to the RSPA WG’s comments and recommendations.

Overarching Finding

Many of the RSPA WG comments and recommendations revolved around the organization of priorities by Focus Area. The RSPA WG found duplication, misplaced priorities, and illogical chronological presentation of priorities when organized by Focus Area. NOAA RESTORE Act Science Program staff discussed these concerns and determined that the focus areas served no beneficial purpose for the plan and only caused confusion. All focus areas have been removed from the revised plan. As such, many of the comments and recommendations from the RSPA WG were addressed with this one action.

Summary of SAB RSPA WG Recommendations and NOAA’s Response

The SAB RSPA WG offered general recommendations and specific annotated edits. In the tables below, NOAA describes each recommendation (Table I) or edit (Table II) from the RSPA WG and how each recommendation or edit was adjudicated. In addition, we include a list of additional changes made to the draft Science Plan that were not recommended by the RSPA WG.

TABLE I: General Recommendations and Comments

Specific Recommendation from RSPA WG	Summary of NOAA Response
1. The NOAA RESTORE Act Plan was too focused or too specific in some areas (<i>e.g.</i> , Marine Protected Areas or Turtle Excluder Devices).	The writing team agreed that some language was too focused or specific. The resolution was to either entirely remove such language or, where such specific language is particularly illustrative, clarify that it is merely an example.
2. The Science Plan did not adequately address the role of science in informing management decisions. The Working Group recommends that the focus of the Science Plan be on the identification and articulation of the science needs in support of supporting and informing improved	Revised text in Section I, parts 2, 4 and 6, strives to emphasize the goal of this Program to support research necessary to improve understanding and better inform the management community leading to science-based decision making.

<p>decision making in each of the four Focus Areas.</p>	
<p>3. The RSPAWG noted that “a crosswalk between RESTORE Act elements 1603, 1604 and 1605 is critical, because there are many programs involved in Gulf of Mexico research and recovery. A crosswalk would help identify gaps and reduce redundancies that could help prioritize research.”</p>	<p>A table has been added to the document (Appendix III) that describes other programs in the Gulf region that may complement activities undertaken by this program. Also, a new figure was added as a graphical representation of the numerous entities involved in research in the Gulf of Mexico and to demonstrate the extensive need for constant coordination and collaboration.</p>
<p>4. The RSPAWG noted a concern over “redundancy and cross-over of Focus Area priorities and logical sequencing of Focal Areas and Long-term Science Priorities.”</p>	<p>Several actions were taken that address this concern: (1) the priorities section of the document was reorganized to present priorities in a topical order; (2) priorities were checked within and cross-checked among each other to remove or minimize redundancy; and (3) priorities are no longer organized by focus areas so logical sequencing of focus areas is no longer a distraction.</p>

TABLE II: Annotated Comments

<p>Specific Recommendation from RSPAWG</p>	<p>Summary of NOAA Response</p>
<p>1. Comment, line 194: Recommendation for renaming the Focus Area.</p>	<p>Focus areas were completely removed in the revised document. Because the focus areas were previously released to the public, and have been reviewed by Congressional members, there are compelling reasons to not change the language. Removing the focus areas from this document seemed the best alternative.</p>
<p>2. Comment, line 196: Reordered and moved priorities.</p>	<p>Focus area assignment of the given priorities is no longer an issue since focus areas were removed. Instead, all ten priorities were reordered in logical sequencing; not in the sense of time but rather a logical order by which actions should occur.</p>
<p>3. Comment, line 198: Revised wording for priority.</p>	<p>Priority text revised.</p>
<p>4. Comment, line 222: Recommend text inserted.</p>	<p>In an attempt to focus more on research and less on synthesis, assessments and inventories, many</p>

	‘key activities’ were removed or refined. This text implies an action more along the line of the types of activities that we are trying to avoid. Therefore, this inserted text was not accepted.
5. Comment, line 310: Revised wording for priority.	Priority text revised.
6. Comment, line 316: Recommend text inserted.	Text accepted.
7. Comment, line 413: Recommendation to move priority to another Focus Area.	Since focus areas were removed, this comment is no longer relevant.
8. Comment, lines 494-499: Recommendation to revise the Focus Area text, revise and reorganize priority.	Focus area recommendation no longer relevant. Priority text revised.
9. Comment, line 561: Be cautious about developing tools.	Text was added in Section I to clarify the purpose and need for tools.
10. Comment, line 570: Sequence is too general and needs to be rewritten.	In the revised document, the sequence write ups have all been removed so this is no longer relevant.
11. Comment, line 604-605: Tagging should be an activity; reword priority.	Priority text revised.
12. Comment, line 627: Paragraph seems out of place.	Paragraph revised.
13. Comment, lines 639-646: Variety of comments expressing concerns over the activities listed.	Text for activities was revised.
14. Comment, lines 679-679: Revise priority text and reorganize activities.	Priority text revised.
15. Comment, lines 710-716: Variety of comments expressing concerns over the activities listed.	Text for activities was revised.
16. Comment, line 742: Notation that outputs seem to be targeted to special programs.	Output text was revised.
17. Comment, line 756: Notation that outcomes indicate strong monitoring role which program will not support.	Outcome text was revised but may need to be further evaluated.

<p>18. Comment, lines 760-766: Recommendation to revise the Focus Area text, revise and reorganize priority; also concern that priority is not research but rather management.</p>	<p>Focus area recommendation no longer relevant. Priority text was significantly revised to emphasize the research needs related to the priority rather than management actions.</p>
<p>19. Comment, lines 791-803: Recommendations for text deletion and revision.</p>	<p>Activity text has been revised to support newly defined priority.</p>
<p>20. Comment, lines 818-820: Recommendation to revise the Focus Area text, revise and reorganize priority.</p>	<p>Focus area recommendation no longer relevant. Priority text revised.</p>
<p>21. Comment, lines 890-894: Recommendation to revise the Focus Area text, revise and reorganize priority.</p>	<p>Focus area recommendation no longer relevant. Priority text revised.</p>
<p>22. Comment, lines 902-933: Recommendation to revise or delete text.</p>	<p>Revisions and deletions accepted.</p>
<p>23. Comment, lines 963-968: Recommendation to revise the Focus Area text, revise and reorganize priority.</p>	<p>Focus area recommendation no longer relevant. Priority text revised.</p>
<p>24. Comment, lines 1033-1036: Recommendation to revise the Focus Area text, revise and reorganize priority.</p>	<p>Focus area recommendation no longer relevant. Priority text revised.</p>
<p>25. Comment, lines 1097-1103: Recommendation to revise the Focus Area text, revise and reorganize priority.</p>	<p>Focus area recommendation no longer relevant. Priority text revised.</p>
<p>26. Comment, lines 1111-1141: Recommendation to revise or delete text.</p>	<p>Revisions and deletions accepted.</p>

Additional Changes

1. The writing team added a new section at the beginning of the document that emphasized the requirements of Section 1604 of the RESTORE Act, which authorized the science program.
2. The writing team added an executive summary.
3. The writing team added a glossary of terms.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The revised Science Plan was released for public comment for 45 days on October 30, 2014 and was sent to the SAB and RSPAWG at that time. Members of the SAB and RSPAWG are encouraged to review the revised plan and submit any additional comments through this public review process, which concludes on December 15. In addition, the NOAA RESTORE Act Science Program will offer a presentation at the SAB meeting on November 17, 2014 that highlights changes made to the plan since the RSPAWG's review.

Going forward, the RSPAWG may be most beneficial to NOAA's RESTORE Act Science Program by offering advice in two key areas: (1) advice on how to ensure the research sponsored by the science program is used by resource managers and the scientific community to accomplish the program's goal of better understanding and management of the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem; and (2) to serve as a forum for discussing how to coordinate and integrate the activities of the science program with other research initiatives either underway or anticipated in the Gulf of Mexico region. NOAA looks forward to continued dialogue on how to translate the expertise of the SAB and RSPAWG into constructive advice for the science program.