

Deepwater Horizon restoration projects need accountability

By Larry McKinney, Feb. 1, 2016



Photo by U.S. Coast Guard

After years of assessment, litigation and negotiation, BP has agreed to pay [more than \\$20 billion in penalties](#) to settle claims in the Deepwater Horizon oil spill that devastated the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. In October, the Natural Resource Trustees released an [eye-popping overview of their plans](#) to put that money to use restoring the environment.

This is an unprecedented opportunity to accomplish something extraordinary, but I'm not sure we're prepared to take full advantage of it. Even as we begin funding high-priority restoration projects, we're not in a position to tell if we are actually making a difference.

As someone who has spent more than 40 years studying, managing and leading restoration efforts around the Gulf, I never imagined seeing numbers like these: \$4.2 billion to restore wetlands and nearshore habitats; \$300 million to improve water quality; \$400 million to restore fisheries; \$163 million for sea turtle restoration; \$404 million for bird restoration; and \$273 million to restore the deep Gulf, to name a few examples.

This is an unprecedented opportunity to accomplish something extraordinary, but I'm not sure we're prepared to take full advantage of it. Even as we begin funding high-priority restoration projects, we're not in a position to tell if we are actually making a difference. The Natural Resource Trustees responsible for overseeing restoration in the Gulf have allocated significant funding to the monitoring and adaptive management of restoration projects — \$520 million. The money will become available over a period of about 17 years, providing time to review projects and report back to the American people about how spill fines are improving the health of the Gulf of Mexico.

The problem is that our track record of actually doing so is not great.

In her recent dissertation, Harte Research Institute graduate [Dr. Brittany Bloomberg reported a disturbing finding](#) about the millions of dollars that have been spent to restore oyster reefs across the United States. More than \$45 million and thousands of hours of labor have been expended on 187 projects, but we don't know if what was done actually worked. Law requires that these projects be monitored and that data be made publicly available so we can learn from their fate, but it could not be found.

I shouldn't be surprised. It's the dirty secret of the restoration business that often little more than lip service is paid to monitoring and evaluating restoration projects. For the most part, we proclaim the acres of oysters, wetlands and seagrass constructed or planted as the measure of success. The reality is that such numbers are just a simple measure of activity, not a measure of how successful we were in creating a functioning ecosystem that will last and provide the environmental benefits for which it was created.

The essence of adaptive management is learning from both mistakes and success and applying that knowledge to the next opportunity. The evidence that we are doing this in habitat restoration is, as Dr. Bloomberg discovered, slim or non-existent. The lesson is driven home when walking across what was an oyster reef restoration project costing hundreds of thousands of dollars and finding no oysters because it was put in the wrong place and sank beneath the mud.

We cannot afford to repeat this cycle with billions of dollars and the health of the Gulf at stake. Since the first days of the Deepwater Horizon spill, reporters repeatedly asked: How healthy is the Gulf now? Those of us who should know, myself included, never had an objective answer.

The good news is that this need has been recognized and is being addressed. Evaluating and ensuring the Gulf's long-term health is a priority of the [Centers of Excellence](#) and the [NOAA RESTORE Science Program](#). Both of these are research programs funded by the BP settlement that are in turn funding projects like the Gulf Report Card, a quantitative measure of environmental health, to help address this issue. The [U.S. Geological Survey's Coastwide Reference Monitoring System in Louisiana](#) is an excellent model on which to build in assessing large-scale restoration projects. Assessment tools exist and are being refined.

We can build a framework to answer questions about the Gulf's health and how well we're spending these billions in restoration dollars. The questions that remain for me are: *Will* it be put into place, and *will* it actually be used? In the Gulf, we have the chance to prove that money invested in our environment returns dividends and that we are spending it wisely. All of us that live around the Gulf and depend upon it deserve nothing less.



Larry McKinney

Executive director, Harte Research Institute at Texas A&M University Corpus Christi