



Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council Record of Decision

Adoption U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement West Shore Lake Pontchartrain Hurricane and Storm Damage Risk Reduction Study for Funding Approval of River Reintroduction Into Maurepas Swamp

Introduction

The Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (Council) hereby adopts the final [Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement \(SEIS\) to West Shore Lake Pontchartrain \(WSLP\) Hurricane and Storm Damage Risk Reduction Study](#) to address requirements of the *National Environmental Policy Act* (42 U.S.C. §§ 4321 *et seq.*) (NEPA) in connection with Council approval of implementation funds for the “River Reintroduction Into Maurepas Swamp” (Maurepas) project in the state of Louisiana. Concurrent with adoption of this SEIS, the Council is approving \$130,000,000 in RESTORE Act (33 U.S.C. § 1321(t) and *note*) Council-Selected Restoration Component funding for the Maurepas project. These implementation funds will be used to restore natural processes that will enhance ecosystem health and reduce or minimize future loss of approximately 45,000 acres of bald cypress-water tupelo forest by reintroducing Mississippi River water into the Maurepas Swamp.

Background

The Council is approving funding for the Maurepas project through an amendment to Funded Priorities List (FPL) 3a. On February 12, 2020, the Council approved FPL 3a, which identified the Maurepas project as a priority for further Council consideration and potential future funding. Activities approved for funding in an FPL are in “Category 1,” and priorities for potential future funding are budgeted for in “Category 2.” The Maurepas project was placed in Category 2, and \$130,000,000 was budgeted for implementation of this project, pending further Council review and approval. The Council has conducted this additional review, including environmental compliance documentation and public comment, and has voted to amend FPL 3a and approve \$130,000,000 million in implementation funding for the Maurepas project.

The Council previously approved \$14,190,000 for planning, engineering and design, and permitting for the Maurepas project in FPL 1. In 2022, the Council approved an additional \$60,000,000 in implementation funds for the Maurepas project in an amendment to the Louisiana State Expenditure Plan, which is funded under the RESTORE Act Spill Impact Component

(“Bucket 3”). Council approval of the FPL 3a amendment brings the total amount of RESTORE Act funds approved for this project to \$204,190,000.

Maurepas Project

The Maurepas project is designed to restore natural processes that will enhance ecosystem health and reduce or minimize future loss of approximately 45,000 acres of bald cypress-water tupelo forest in coastal Louisiana by reintroducing Mississippi River water into the Maurepas Swamp. The current hydrologic regime in the Maurepas swamp is no longer conducive to sustaining swamp forest habitat. Historically, the swamp received oxygenated water, sediment, and nutrient inputs from the Mississippi River during seasonal river flooding and via a smaller distributary, Bayou Manchac. That process was interrupted by the construction of local and subsequent federal levees built along the Mississippi River for flood control as well as the blockage of the river’s connection with Bayou Manchac. This altered hydrologic regime has prevented natural connection of the swamp to the river’s life-sustaining waters and resulted in oxygen-poor, stagnant water conditions that impair forest health and associated aquatic habitats. The reintroduction of river water would help revitalize the Maurepas Swamp by providing freshwater, nutrients, and sediments needed for healthy trees and long-term sustainability. This river reintroduction project (also known as a river “diversion”) involves an intake and control structure on the Mississippi River, a channel to convey the river water to the swamp, and “guide levees” along the channel to ensure that river water reaches the intended location and to prevent flooding.

Additional information on the Maurepas project, including metrics of success, response to science reviews and more, is available in an activity-specific appendix to the FPL, which can be found at <https://www.restorethegulf.gov>.

WSLP SEIS and Environmental Compliance

To comply with NEPA, the Council is adopting the 2022 U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ WSLP SEIS. The WSLP flood risk reduction project is in the vicinity of the Maurepas project, and portions of the two projects geographically overlap. For efficiency, the state is consolidating elements of the engineering, design, and construction of the overlapping portions. The WSLP SEIS addresses the environmental impacts of and alternatives to the Maurepas project in the context of required compensatory mitigation for the wetland impacts of the WSLP project. While a portion of the overall projected net ecological benefits of the Maurepas project will be used as such compensatory mitigation, no FPL funding is allocated to addressing this requirement. The compensatory mitigation portion of the Maurepas project is being entirely funded with \$60,000,000 approved for such purpose under Bucket 3. FPL funding will be used only for the portion of the projected ecosystem restoration benefits that are in addition to and greater than the WSLP compensatory mitigation benefits funded by Bucket 3.

In addition to NEPA, the WSLP SEIS addresses the *Endangered Species Act* (ESA), the *Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act* (MSA), the *National Historic Preservation Act* (NHPA), *Clean Water Act* Section 404, and other relevant environmental laws. The Council has determined that the WSLP SEIS and associated compliance documents address the environmental effects of the Maurepas project. To ensure compliance with ESA, MSA, NHPA, and other relevant laws, the Council requires that the sponsor of the project (the state of Louisiana) adhere to all applicable conditions listed in WSLP SEIS and the associated environmental compliance documents.

Public Comments

On February 2, 2023, the Council published a notice on the Council website seeking public comment on the proposal to amend the FPL to approve implementation funding for the Maurepas project. This notice also sought comment on the Council's proposal to approve funding for the separate "Bahia Grande Wetland System Restoration" project located in Texas under the Council's 2015 Initial FPL. The public comment period was 32 days and ended on March 6, 2023. The Council received five comments, all of which were supportive of approving funding for one or both of the proposed projects. The Council received no comments objecting to the proposed funding approvals.

Council Decision

Based on the foregoing, on March 29, 2023, the Council voted to (i) adopt the SEIS, (ii) amend FPL 3a by moving the Maurepas project implementation activities from Category 2 to Category 1, and (iii) approve \$130,000,000 in implementation funding.

The Council has authorized the Executive Director of the Council to execute this Record of Decision on its behalf.

Mary Walker
Executive Director, Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council

(Signature) MARY WALKER

Digitally signed by
MARY WALKER
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