

Activity: Robinson Preserve Wetlands Restoration (Implementation)

Unique Identifier: DOC_RESTORE_001_011_Cat1

Location: Florida, Manatee County

Type of Activity: Implementation

FPL Category: 1 – Funding Approved

Cost Estimate: \$1,790,546

Responsible Council Member: Department of Commerce (DOC)/National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)

Partnering Council Member(s): Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP)

Originally submitted by: The DOC as a component within the proposal “Connecting Coastal Waters: Restoring Coastal Wetland Hydrology”

Executive Summary: The Robinson Preserve Wetlands Restoration project is part of the Connecting Coastal Waters (CCW) initiative NOAA would lead with partners to restore the extent, functionality, and resiliency of Gulf Coast wetlands. NOAA will work with partners to implement this project to restore 118.2 acres of upland and wetland habitat on a fallow parcel recently acquired to expand Robinson Preserve in the Tampa Bay watershed. NOAA will also work with partners to conduct monitoring of restoration outcomes and outreach and educational activities to share restoration practices and engage stakeholders.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION: The project consists of the following.

Specific Actions/Activities: The CCW initiative would restore and enhance ecosystem resilience, sustainability, and natural defenses by reestablishing natural hydrology and connectivity between freshwater and marine habitats in priority areas across the Gulf Coast. This project will implement restoration activities, conduct monitoring to assess restoration outcomes, and engage in outreach and educational activities with restoration practitioners and stakeholders. Restoration activities will be conducted to: 1) create coastal upland, wetland habitats, and tidal creeks designed to incorporate projected near-term sea level rise; 2) create high quality estuarine subtidal habitats; and 3) restore natural hydrology linking the coastal upland, wetland, and estuarine areas. When completed, the project will provide approximately 57.6 acres of coastal upland habitat and 60.6 acres of wetland, open water sub-tidal, and open freshwater habitats, for a total of 118.2 acres of productive habitat from fallow land. Remaining portions of the expansion property not identified for restoration is dedicated to an environmental education center and other recreational facilities that would be constructed and managed by Manatee County. A monitoring plan will be implemented before and after construction to support an adaptive management approach. The monitoring plan will include pre-construction monitoring to provide baseline information, during construction monitoring to ensure the project is being implemented as designed, and post-construction monitoring to evaluate whether the project meets success criteria. Post-monitoring will be completed over 36-months following completion of restoration. Outreach and educational activities will be conducted to share restoration practices and project results.

Task 1: Planning and Local Involvement: A project team will be assembled to provide technical input and expertise during the construction and monitoring of this project. Team members will provide a multi-disciplinary approach to evaluate monitoring data and recommend any corrective actions necessary to meet restoration goals.

Deliverable 1: Project team member's list, roles, and team description.

Task 2: Implementation & Construction: NOAA or members of the project team will develop a contract statement of work, prepare bid documents, select a construction contractor, determine a schedule, and finalize construction plans. The construction task includes both the action of restoring the site and post-construction management including monitoring of the construction. Monitoring will occur before, during, and after construction to ensure work is progressing and completed as designed.

Deliverable 2.1: Statement of Work and Bid Documents.

Deliverable 2.2: Final construction as-built drawings and construction completion report.

Task 3: Monitoring and Evaluation: This task will implement a monitoring and evaluation plan developed through the project planning phase. The data collected before and after project construction will document progress toward achieving restoration project goals and objectives and inform adaptive management decision-making. Three types of monitoring will be conducted: 1) pre-implementation monitoring—providing baseline information to compare with post implementation data to determine whether the restoration is having the desired effect; 2) implementation monitoring—ensuring the project is being implemented as planned and identifies needed modifications; and 3) effectiveness monitoring—enabling evaluation of whether a project has met its objectives.

Deliverable 3.1: Semi-annual Monitoring Reports and Data Sheets.

Deliverable 3.2: Final Monitoring and Evaluation Report.

Task 4: Outreach and Education: The project team will implement the Outreach and Education Plan developed through the project planning phase in cooperation with partners and existing community groups. Strategies may include site tours, presentations, interpretive outreach materials, videos, and other efforts to share project success. Activities conducted will be documented, including copies of materials produced, and compiled into a final report.

Deliverable 4.1: Outreach and Education Report.

Task 5: Inventory of Coast Wetland and Hydrology Restoration Opportunities:

NOAA or a sub-recipient will lead a collaborative process to create a science-based inventory of coastal wetland hydrological restoration projects. The objective of the inventory is to identify projects that meet the Council's goals for ecosystem restoration within the Tampa Bay watershed focus area. This task will build upon a 2012 hydrology restoration inventory conducted by NOAA and Sea Grant and will seek to leverage compatible watershed planning efforts by local partners.

Deliverable 5.1: Inventory plan of work.

Deliverable 5.2: Inventory report and online map.

Ecological Benefits/Outcomes and Metrics: The site contains a range of important coastal wetland habitats including mangrove, salt marsh, salt barren, coastal strand hammock and maritime hammock. Robinson Preserve has undergone extensive restoration from disturbed farmland to coastal and wetland habitats, including the restoration of tidal flow within the property. In addition, the Preserve was expanded with the acquisition of a 150-acre parcel in 2012, which is the site of the proposed restoration. While significant portions of the overall Robinson Preserve are either made up of extant mangrove swamp systems or recently restored areas, 150 acres of the site (Robinson Expansion) remain in need of restoration, providing ample opportunity to enhance regional ecosystem services and bolster wildlife populations. This project will continue these restoration efforts and restore 118.2 acres of the 150-acre expansion of Robinson Preserve from mostly disturbed land to native wetland and upland habitats by re-contouring the land, followed by planting with native vegetation. The 150-acre expansion area was in agricultural production for at least five decades and has lay fallow for the past ten years. Fill was piled over large portions of the site for a golf course community before acquisition. Historical uses have allowed nuisance and exotic vegetation to overrun the majority of the site, severely limiting ecological functions. While the overall project planned by local partners involves enhancements for public access, all RESTORE funds received will be used for ecological restoration.

Measures of Success: Specific metrics to evaluate the ecological benefits and outcomes will be established in the planning phase of this project. Potential measures of success include:

Construction Verification: Construction was completed as designed. **Restoration extent:** Acres of upland and wetland habitats created/restored.

Hydrology Parameters: Water flow pattern.

Vegetation Parameters: Plant coverage (of native and invasive plant species) and survival of planted native species.

Leveraging and Co-Funding:

- **Building on prior or other investments:** This project will complement an approximately \$27 million investment made by Manatee County and partners for restoration of the already established 482-acre Robinson Preserve. In addition, past investments by Manatee County to acquire and conserve the project area, which expanded the 482-acre Robinson Preserve by an additional 150 acres of adjacent lands are valued at \$3.2 million dollars. This project will continue on-going restoration work and build upon the Robinson Preserve Expansion Phase 1 and Phase 2a restoration projects by Manatee County and the Southwest Florida Water Management District. The Preserve will also construct low-impact recreational facilities and a visitor's center to provide recreational and education opportunities for the community that will enhance outreach and education activities to be implemented through this project. In addition, this project will leverage the many partnerships and studies conducted for this high priority project by Manatee County, FDEP, Tampa Bay Estuary Program and Sarasota Bay Estuary Program.

Duration of Activity: 9 years.

Life of Activity: By restoring habitat within Robinson Preserve, this project will provide ecological benefits in perpetuity. Preserve staff are in place to continue the monitoring of these restoration activities and have on-going habitat management and educational programs underway.

RESPONSE TO SCIENCE REVIEWS:

Comment: External science review of the Connecting Coastal Waters proposal, which included a total of eleven projects, resulted in one all or mostly positive response and two generally positive, but with a need for more information. Reviewers requested information related to outcomes of planning, engineering, design, and permitting including, site-specific conditions, evaluation of uncertainties, risks, mitigation, measures of success, and data quality standards.

Response: This project will implement restoration activities based on detailed restoration plans, certified engineering and design, and approved permits completed by the project planning phase. The project's construction design work as well as the monitoring and evaluation plan will incorporate necessary steps to mitigate for project uncertainties and risks that have been identified in greater detail through the permitting and environmental compliance process conducted under the planning phase (see additional information below). This project will also implement a detailed monitoring and evaluation plan developed under the planning phase that will collect data to evaluate project specific measures of success. Monitoring data collected for this project will undergo verification to ensure the quality, utility, and integrity of information collected.

ENVIRONMENTAL COMPLIANCE:

To comply with National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) for Robinson Preserve, the Council is adopting the 2015 PEIS developed by NOAA's Restoration Center. This PEIS provides a programmatic-level environmental analysis to support NOAA's restoration activities throughout the coastal United States, including the Gulf of Mexico. The NOAA PEIS includes a programmatic-level analysis of restoration alternatives by activity type and the associated environmental consequences. In addition to providing a programmatic analysis, the PEIS can be used to cover site-specific actions, including funding awards, provided that the activity being proposed is within the range of alternatives and scope of potential environmental consequences and does not have significant adverse impacts. NOAA has determined and documented, in a NEPA Inclusion Analysis dated June 20, 2017, that the

Category 2 Robinson Preserve implementation activities for which Council funding is being sought meet these criteria and that no further NEPA review is needed.

During project-specific engineering and design, Clean Water Act (CWA) permitting and public interest review, and interagency regulatory review processes, there was additional analysis of site specific conditions and the effects of project-specific design alternatives. Subsequently, multiple modifications were made in response to technical evaluation, resource agency feedback and public comments in order to maximize project benefits and minimize any adverse effects. On May 22, 2017, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issued a CWA Section 404 permit (SAJ-2014-02406) for the Robinson Preserve project. NOAA has confirmed that this permit addresses its Magnuson-Stevens Act recommendations pertaining to Essential Fish Habitat. The permit also contains conditions pertaining to compliance with the Endangered Species Act and the National Historic Preservation Act. In addition, the Florida State Historic Preservation Officer and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have reviewed the overall Robinson Preserve project. These reviews were conducted as part of their respective reviews of the complementary Robinson Preserve restoration project referenced above that is sponsored by the EPA and being funded separately under the FPL.

The Council has reviewed the applicable environmental compliance documentation. Based on this review, the Council has adopted the PEIS to support the approval of implementation funds for Robinson Preserve, provided that the project is implemented in accordance with the terms and conditions of the CWA Section 404 permit. This permit and the associated documentation can be found at <https://www.restorethegulf.gov/funded-priorities-list>. (See: Robinson Preserve Wetlands Restoration – Implementation.)