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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 5, 2011

Gulf Coast Task Force Releases Ecosystem Restoration Strategy For Public Review

Agenda outlines blueprint for reversing decline of Gulf Coast ecosystem

WASHINGTON - The Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force, chaired by U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa P. Jackson, today released for public review and feedback its comprehensive preliminary strategy for long term ecosystem restoration. The strategy, which will be presented to President Obama at the end of the public review period, represents an historic opportunity for addressing long-standing issues contributing to the decline of the Gulf's critical ecosystem. The preliminary strategy is the first effort of its kind to be developed with the involvement of parties throughout the region, including the states, tribes, federal agencies, local governments and thousands of interested citizens and organizations. The plan strategy, which builds upon on-going efforts underway in the Gulf Coast states includes specific steps for on-the-ground action and represents the Task Force's commitment to putting Gulf coastal restoration on an equal footing with other national priorities.

One year ago today, President Obama established the Task Force by executive order, in response to recommendations from a report by Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus, to continue the Administration's ongoing commitment to the Gulf region. The group is made up of representatives from the five Gulf States and 11 federal agencies, including the Environmental Protection Agency, Council on Environmental Quality, Department of the Interior, Department of Commerce, Department of Defense, Department of Agriculture, Department of Justice, Department of Transportation, Office of Management and Budget, Office of Science and Technology Policy and Domestic Policy Council.

"Even before last year's oil spill, the Gulf of Mexico endured decades of decline that threatened the environmental and economic health of this region. This strategy is designed to prepare the region for transitioning from a response to the spill into a long-term recovery that supports the vital ecosystem and the people who depend on it," said Administrator Jackson. "The health of the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem starts and ends with its people and its communities. The individuals and families who visit the Gulf, who work in the region, who depend on its resources, and especially those who call it home, know its needs and challenges best. They will be integral to creating and executing this long-term strategy."

"The Task Force's draft strategy identifies fundamental obstacles that have plagued restoration and protection efforts in Louisiana and other states for decades. The report attempts to begin reversing 80 years of mismanagement," said Garret Graves, Task Force vice-chair and chair of the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority of Louisiana. "It identifies critical issues such as changes in river management, the use of dredged sediment, navigation channel bank

stabilization, and the need to expedite the snail's pace process of implementing water resources projects. History has proven that being reactive on disaster mitigation costs exponentially more. This report is an important first step in moving toward a proactive strategy as recognized through the implementation of the state's coastal master plan. There is much work still left to be done and we look forward to continuing to work with Task Force agencies and our fellow Gulf States to finally stabilize our coast and protect the Gulf communities.”

The natural resources of the Gulf's ecosystem are vital to many of the region's industries that directly support economic progress and job creation, including tourism and recreation, seafood production and sales, energy production and navigation and commerce. Among the major initiatives with specific actions recommended by the preliminary strategy to protect and restore those natural resources are:

- Stopping the Loss of Wetlands

Stopping the loss of critical wetlands, sand barriers and beaches is a key recommendation of the preliminary strategy. Key habitats for a wide range of fish and other animals are being lost or reduced across the Gulf. The creation of channels and levees from dredging in the Lower Mississippi often can “disconnect” the vast wetland delta from the source of sediments that built the delta over thousands of years. The strategy aims to restore the supply of sediments needed to build up eroding wetlands and to ultimately reconnect these valuable resources to their historic source of sediments, particularly in the Lower Mississippi. To help do this, the strategy recommends placing ecosystem restoration on an equal footing with historic uses such as navigation and flood damage reduction by approaching water resource management decisions in a far more comprehensive manner that will bypass harm to wetlands, barrier islands and beaches. The strategy also recommends implementation of several congressionally authorized projects in the Gulf that are intended to reverse the trend of wetlands loss.

- Reducing the Flow of Nutrients into the Gulf

The strategy calls for working in the Gulf and upstream in the Mississippi watershed to reduce the flow of nutrients into the Gulf by supporting state nutrient reduction frameworks, new nutrient reduction approaches, and targeted watershed work to reduce agricultural and urban sources of nutrients. The strategy recommends addressing the complex issues surrounding the transport of nutrients in excess to our Gulf coast by broadly supporting action-oriented innovations from all sectors that address both the environmental as well as the economics of effective nutrient management.

- Enhancing Resiliency Among Coastal Communities

The strategy calls for enhancing the quality of life of Gulf residents by working in partnership with Gulf with coastal communities themselves -- the living laboratories for facing the challenges posed. The strategy specifically recommends working with each of the States to build the integrated capacity needed through effective coastal improvement plans to better secure the future of their coastal communities and to implement existing efforts underway.

Additionally, the Task Force will begin immediately reviewing existing policies, programs and regulations that are slowing down restoration progress, particularly in the habitat restoration area. The Task Force will also explore innovative ways to implement restoration, measure success and support the restoration with science.

The following are statements on the release of the preliminary strategy from representatives of the member states on the task force:

N. Gunter Guy, Commissioner of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources said, "The combined efforts of the federal and state members of the Task Force have resulted in the release of a preliminary strategy focused on restoring the Gulf Coast ecosystem. Alabama looks forward to receiving feedback from the public on the strategy and commits to continue working to improve Alabama's Gulf Coast communities and protecting its natural resources."

Mimi A. Drew, Florida's representative on the task force and Special Advisor to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Herschel T. Vinyard, Jr. said, "Today's release of this important report is the culmination of more than a year's worth of collaboration and hard work to identify priorities and a strategy to improve, restore and protect the fragile and vital Gulf ecosystem. The Gulf of Mexico provides huge environmental and economic benefits to Florida and we look forward to input from the public to refine this plan."

Trudy D. Fisher, Executive Director of the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality said, "The Task Force marked an unprecedented commitment at the federal and state levels to create a shared vision for a healthier Gulf Coast ecosystem. We are confident that the resulting strategy will set the stage for future cooperation and success. Mississippi will be a critical partner as the work continues."

Helen S. Young, Deputy Commissioner of Coastal Resources in the Texas General Land Office commented, "The collaborative federal, state, and local process that involved visits to the five Gulf states and listening sessions with locals highlighted the states' shared issues and unique needs. For instance, it emphasized the importance of Texas's barrier islands, which are the first line of defense against storm surge like Hurricane Ike produced in 2008, making it the second costliest hurricane in recent times with damage of \$127 billion. The Strategy also underscores the significance of the Gulf of Mexico to the national economy and identifies the issues of greatest concern for the region. Restoration efforts based on the strategy will help ensure that these critical environmental and economic resources remain viable."

This preliminary strategy represents the Task Force's strong commitment to the restoration of the Gulf Coast. The strategy was developed following more than 40 public meetings throughout the Gulf to listen to the concerns of the public. It is available to the public for review and feedback at www.epa.gov/gulfcoasttaskforce, until 11:59 p.m. EST October 26, 2011. The Task Force will release the final version in December.