Project Summary

Project Title: Strategic Conservation Assessment of Gulf Coast Landscapes

Geographic Location: The geographic location for this project will be coincident with the RESTORE Act Gulf Coast Region [GCR] (see pg. 2 of HR 4348-185 Sec 1603, Sec 311 https://www.treasury.gov/services/restore-act/Documents/Final-Restore-Act.pdf). This will include the coastal zone areas of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida.

Project Rationale/Need: Currently, the majority of conservation tools in the Gulf Coast Region are useful for only the specific application they were designed for. None meet the broader needs of the RESTORE Council for assessing land conservation projects since these designs typically don't cover the entire Gulf Coast; represent only a subset of stakeholder interests; lack specificity of action; don't incorporate anticipated futures; and/or fail to consider the full suite of objectives for restoration. There is therefore a need by the Council for a full-scale, broad-perspective decision support system that can integrate the priorities and values of agencies, entities, and organizations with a stake in Gulf land conservation along with transparently translating those priorities into projects and spatial data layers to inform strategic investments.

Project Goals and Objectives: This project addresses this need directly by collaboratively developing a suite of conservation planning tools that RESTORE Council members can use as they identify and evaluate future land conservation strategies, opportunities, and projects in the Gulf Coast Region. The three specific objectives of this project are to develop: 1) shared priorities and objectives; 2) a tool to prioritize existing land conservation projects (i.e., the Conservation Prioritization Tool, or CPT); and 3) a spatial data layer to prioritize the entire Gulf Coast Region (i.e., the Strategic Conservation Assessment, or SCA). These tools will be developed through an inclusive and collaborative process that evaluates data from previously existing land conservation plans and incorporates local, regional and Gulf-wide input.

Project Activities: The project combines the land conservation plans already in existence in the Gulf region into decision support tools – the CPT and SCA - that offer a Gulf-wide perspective on land conservation. These tools and the subsequent modeling and analysis will provide RESTORE Council members with information they can use to ensure that the land conservation decisions they make provide the greatest benefit to current and future ecosystem sustainability and resilience within the states and across the Gulf. Under project Objective 1 we will compile established conservation targets across a variety of scales and levels to capture the primary considerations for prioritizing land conservation. For Objective 2 we will work with Gulf stakeholders to incorporate shared priorities into a suite of criteria related to ecological, economic, and social values and develop a tabular Conservation Prioritization Tool using Multi-Criteria Decision Analysis. Objective 3 will involve development of both static and optimized geospatial decision support systems, depicting criteria identified in Objective 2, to help characterize the ecological, economic, and social values in a geospatial environment.

Project Outputs and Outcomes: The final products will include: a new Geographic Information System (GIS) of existing plans and other pertinent information; a CPT that reflects the Council members' shared goals and priorities; and an SCA that spatially depicts land conservation opportunities based upon shared goals and other factors. These tools will lead to better informed decisions regarding land conservation strategies that will support local communities by increasing tourism, keeping working lands working, and maintaining ecosystem health. Decisions that include local, regional and watershed perspectives are more likely to achieve the greatest shared economic and ecosystem benefits.