Priority & Commitment To Plan Evaluation

Bucket 2 – Council Selected Restoration Component

PROPOSAL TITLE

The Mississippi Gulf Coast Forest Restoration and Conservation Initiative

PROPORAL NUMBER

USDA-3

LOCATION

Mississippi Gulf Coastal Plain

SPONSOR(S)

USDA

TYPE OF FUNDING REQUESTED (Planning, Technical Assistance, Implementation)

Planning, Technical Assistance, and Implementation

REVIEWED BY:

Kristen Laursen

DATE:

February 21, 2015

A. Comprehensive Plan Goals

Of the goals addressed by the proposal, which is the single primary goal?
Proposals should discuss how the proposed activity is designed to address the primary goal.
Check one:

- (●) Restore and Conserve Habitat – Restore and conserve the health, diversity and resilience of key coastal, estuarine and marine habitats.
- ( ) Restore Water Quality – Restore and protect water quality of the Gulf Coast region's fresh, estuarine and marine waters.
- ( ) Replenish and Protect Living Coastal and Marine Resources – Restore and protect healthy, diverse and sustainable living coastal and marine resources.
- ( ) Enhance Community Resilience – Build upon and sustain communities with capacity to adapt to short- and long-term changes.
- ( ) Restore and Revitalize the Gulf Economy – Enhance the sustainability and resiliency of the Gulf economy.

Notes:

As described in the proposal, the primary goal of this proposal is habitat restoration and conservation with a secondary goal of restoring water quality. As stated in the document, the proposal involves restoration projects that will be implemented throughout the Mississippi coastal plain and will include longleaf pine, coastal savanna, pitcher plant bog, bottomland hardwood forest, and mesic slope forest restoration. These forested ecosystems provide habitat for numerous threatened and endangered plants and animals. Additionally, coastal stream restoration, non-native invasive species control and detection, and updates to existing watershed restoration plan projects are proposed.

B. Comprehensive Plan Objectives

Proposals must clearly identify which objectives the proposal will address

1. Restore, Enhance, and Protect Habitats

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated ( ) N/A

2. Restore, Improve, and Protect Water Resources

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated ( ) N/A

3. Protect and Restore Living Coastal and Marine Resources

( ) YES (●) NO ( ) Not articulated ( ) N/A

4. Restore and Enhance Natural Processes and Shorelines

( ) YES (●) NO ( ) Not articulated ( ) N/A

Notes:

As described in the proposal, primary objectives of this proposal are restoration, enhancement, and protection of habitat while secondary objectives include; restoration, improvement and protection of water resources, improving science-based decision-making processes, promoting community resilience, and promoting natural resource stewardship.

Secondary objectives selected are:
- Restore, Improve, and Protect Water Resources
- Promote Community Resilience

8. Of these objectives which is the single primary objective the proposal addresses?

Check one:

- (●) Restore, Enhance, and Protect Habitats
- ( ) Restore, Improve, and Protect Water Resources
- ( ) Protect and Restore Living Coastal and Marine Resources
- ( ) Restore and Enhance Natural Processes and Shorelines
- ( ) Promote Community Resilience
- ( ) Promote Natural Resource Stewardship and Environmental Education
- ( ) Improve Science-Based Decision-Making Processes

C. RESTORE Act and Comprehensive Plan Priority Criteria

All proposals must explain if the proposal addresses one or more of the priority criteria as established by the RESTORE Act and Initial Comprehensive Plan and, if so, how.

1. This project is projected to make the greatest contribution to restoring and protecting the natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches, and coastal wetlands of the Gulf Coast region, without regard to geographic location within the Gulf Coast region.

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated ( ) N/A

2. This is a large-scale project/program that is projected to substantially contribute to restoring and protecting the natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches, and coastal wetlands of the Gulf Coast ecosystem.

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated ( ) N/A

3. This project is contained in existing Gulf Coast State comprehensive plans for the restoration and protection of natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches, and coastal wetlands of the Gulf Coast region.

(●) YES ( ) NO

4. This project will restore long-term resiliency of the natural resources, ecosystems, fisheries, marine and wildlife habitats, beaches, and coastal wetlands most impacted by the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill.

(●) YES ( ) NO

5. Promote Community Resilience

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated ( ) N/A

6. Promote Natural Resource Stewardship and Environmental Education

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated ( ) N/A

Notes:

The proposal states that it will substantially contribute to the restoration and protection of the natural resources and wildlife habitats of Gulf Coast ecosystems. The sponsor (USDA) notes that projects included in the proposal focus on restoring the health and resiliency of ecosystems within the MS coastal plain and these projects will help rehabilitate coastal wetlands and estuaries affected by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The sponsor also notes that restoring more characteristic ecosystems across the landscape would help protect investments in forest and timber management as site-appropriate species are less susceptible to damage from tropical weather systems and adapted to frequent wildfires.

D. Comprehensive Plan Commitments

All proposals must demonstrate how the proposal will achieve any or all of the commitments in the Comprehensive Plan. The commitments in the Comprehensive Plan are as follows:

Does the proposal articulate how it will achieve the following commitments in the comprehensive plan?

1. Science-based Decision-Making

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated

Notes:

USDA states that a proposed ecosystem modeling application will assist in prioritization of projects to ensure that restoration takes place in geographic locations where they will have the greatest impact. Ecological systems mapping of the project area will be conducted to better inform the partners about restoration needs and priorities. The map will cover 1.5 million acres across an eight county area. Environmental factors and field reference plots will be used to define ecological zones. The map will also use environmental variables derived from LiDAR, (information on geology and soils) to model ecological systems. Information from conservation organizations in the state as well as the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks, Museum of Natural Sciences, and NatureServe, will be used to make the product as useful and inclusive as possible.

2. Regional Ecosystem-based Approach to Restoration

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated

Notes:

As stated in the proposal, the Mississippi Gulf Coast Forest Restoration and Conservation Initiative represents the first phase of a multi-phase landscape scale ecosystem restoration strategy for the Mississippi coastal plain. The projects identified have been prioritized based on an analysis of critical needs, environmental compliance readiness, resource and partner leveraging potential, and greatest predicted impact for residents within the coastal plain. Future phases will leverage the successful restoration activities of the initial phase and involve projects that are currently in the design and evaluation stage of development. The Initiative would complement other forest-focused, multi-phase proposed RESTORE projects that may be implemented throughout the Gulf region.

3. Engagement, Inclusion, and Transparency

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated

Notes:

As stated by the sponsor, developing the Mississippi Gulf Coast Forest Restoration and Conservation Initiative included broad participation from federal, state, and local governments, non-governmental conservation organizations, and the military. An example of inclusiveness is the consultation and engagement of the Native American tribes within proposed project areas. The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and the Vancleave Live Oak Choctaws will be cooperators in Initiative projects: 1) through the watershed planning efforts led by the Land Trust for Mississippi Coastal Plain; 2) through technical assistance with the implementation of restoration projects; 3) though consultation on interpretive displays; and 4) as volunteers for the sentinel arboretum project. There may also be training opportunities for tribal members related to proposed restoration techniques.

4. Leveraging Resources and Partnerships

- [x] YES
- [ ] NO
- [ ] Not articulated

Notes:

USDA notes that the Mississippi Gulf Coast Forest Restoration and Conservation Initiative includes a diverse group of partners, including those from federal, state, and local government agencies, the military, the regional conservation network, and Native American tribes. These partners have been working to achieve conservation and restoration goals in south Mississippi for many years. Working collectively will allow all parties to benefit from shared knowledge, staff, and equipment.

5. Delivering Results and Measuring Impacts

- [x] YES
- [ ] NO

Notes:

The sponsor states that project results will be measured using standard metrics, i.e. acres of fuels treatments, acres of longleaf pine planted, number of management plans written, etc., applicable to the specific projects. These results would be published by the partner implementing the project.

E. Meeting Commitments and Tracking and Measuring Progress

1. Does the proposal articulate how it will meet and achieve its commitments?

- [x] YES
- [ ] NO
- [ ] Not articulated

2. Does the proposal have a plan for tracking and measuring progress?

- [x] YES
- [ ] NO

Notes:

As stated in the proposal, all restoration projects will be monitored for 5 years by the Initiative partner responsible for implementation. Baseline conditions will be collected according to standard protocol. The sponsor further notes that the responsible partner will seek any necessary technical and/or scientific expertise to ensure environmental concerns are addressed.

F. Proposal Emphasis Areas

Does the submission describe how the proposed project or program addresses the following four considerations:

1. Is the proposed activity **foundational** in the sense that the project or program forms an initial core step (or steps) in addressing a significant ecosystem issue, and can future activities be tiered to substantially increase the benefits?

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated

Notes:

As stated in the proposal, the Mississippi Gulf Coast Forest Restoration and Conservation Initiative is a collection of regionally scalable projects that: 1) plan and prioritize restoration opportunities; 2) implement restoration projects on public and private lands; and 3) create a foundation for future restoration and conservation projects. The proposed activities form the foundation for future systematic management and conservation projects by substantially improving ecosystem resiliency, caring for the headwaters and streams of the landscape, developing models for prioritization of restoration activities, and educating private landowners.

2. Will the proposed activity be **sustainable** over time?

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated

Notes:

USDA notes that the proposed projects will be sustainable because a substantial amount of the land on which the projects will be completed is protected. This protected land is owned by federal, state, or local governments or one of the partner non-governmental conservation organizations. The private lands are often protected through easements. These protected lands are generally managed for the ecosystem services they provide and decisions are driven by policy based on “best available science.” The partners implementing these projects are committed to the long-term restoration of these habitats and will seek future additional funding for complementary restoration projects.

3. Is the proposed activity **likely to succeed**?

(●) YES ( ) NO ( ) Not articulated

Notes:

The sponsor states that the success of the proposed activities is likely because the partner agencies and organizations have a long and successful history of collaborative restoration experience and shared restoration goals. Additionally, all landowner classes across the landscape are represented.

4. Does the proposed activity **benefit** the human **community**?
(examples of benefits may include, but are not limited to: how a project will utilize local workers, how a project will benefit geographically or socially vulnerable communities, how a project will benefit the natural resources critical to natural-resource dependent industries such as fisheries, tourism, etc.)

- (●) YES
- ( ) NO
- ( ) Not articulated

Notes:

The sponsor notes that the Mississippi Gulf Coast Forest Restoration and Conservation Initiative would have a positive economic impact on two of the state's most significant industries. Improving the quality of freshwater input into estuaries would positively impact the $450 million coastal seafood industry. Restoration and conservation of forested watersheds would positively impact the forest products industry. The forest products industry utilizes local workers and creates a total economic impact, in the three coastal counties alone, of $211 million annually. In addition to the positive impact on economically important industries, studies indicate that landscape scale forest restoration also provides additional positive economic impacts. Studies indicate that for every $1 spent in restoration, $2.40 in total economic activity is generated. The sponsor