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Sept. 23, 2015

Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council
Attention: Draft FPL Comments
Hale Boggs Federal Building
500 Poydras Street, Suite 1117
New Orleans, LA 70130

Re: Alabama Funded Priorities List

The R Street Institute is encouraged by the eight Alabama-focused projects contained within the initial Funded Priorities List (FPL) released by the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (council). Alabama's coast is a tremendous recreational, economic and environmental asset to the state. As a source of both industrial growth and critical diverse ecosystems, Alabama's Gulf Coast must be a priority for both the state and the region.

The FPL contains projects that range from restoration to monitoring and planning. They point to one central theme: Alabama must develop a regularly updated coastal master plan that effectively articulates the state's priorities.

Regardless of whether project funding comes from the Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) process, RESTORE Act resources, economic damage settlements or other revenue streams, Alabama must have a ready list of priority projects. Each project should have clear objectives, define measures of success and be based on the best available science.

As the state develops a coastal master plan, it must work with other states in a coordinated approach to Gulf Coast conservation. Rather than relying on distant federal authorities and mechanisms, Gulf Coast states must assume the responsibility to ensure both economic prosperity and environmental stewardship at the water's edge.

Thankfully, Alabama has an exceptional model for coastal planning in Louisiana's "Comprehensive Master Plan for a Sustainable Coast." Updated every five years, the plan focuses on prioritizing projects necessary to ensure the continued environmental and economic well-being of the state's coast. As funding becomes available, projects are initiated. Louisiana's plan demonstrates and effectively articulates the crucial interplay between the economy and the environment. Politicians, trade associations, landowner groups and environmental advocates across the political spectrum all contributed to the plan's framework. In that respect, it transcends politics while focusing on the challenges facing the state's coast.

If Alabama had already developed a master plan similar to Louisiana's, much of the funding in the FPL dedicated to planning and research might have been more effectively deployed on restoration and fortification projects.

Alabama and the remaining Gulf Coast states without comprehensive coastal plans would be wise to use the research and planning opportunities in the FPL as a useful starting tool to develop their own visions for their coasts. We shouldn't wait for another natural or man-made disaster to quicken our focus on the economic and environmental importance of the region's coast.

Sincerely,

Cameron Smith
State Programs Director
R Street Institute