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Sept. 25, 2015

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

Re: Florida Funded Priorities List

The R Street Institute is encouraged by the proposed projects contained within Florida's initial Funded Priorities List (FPL) released by the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (council).

Florida's coast is its most precious asset. Indeed, it has more miles of coastline than all other Gulf Coast states combined. Its environmental well-being is critical to Florida's enormous agricultural, tourism and fishing industries, as well as the physical and economic welfare of Floridians. In short, coastal conservation and restoration must remain a priority for both Florida and the region.

The FPL contains projects that range from water-quality improvements to wetlands restoration. These appear to be wise, needed investments. Tangible benefits include improvement of the coast's natural ecology and wildlife habitats; the preservation of coastal wetlands that serve as natural buffers to protect inland developed areas against damaging wind and storm surge; and stimulation of once-vibrant local economies in areas such as Apalachicola, whose historic oyster industry has been devastated in recent years.

However, Florida would do well to develop a regularly updated coastal master plan that effectively articulates the state's priorities in an open and transparent way.

Regardless of the funding source for these and future projects – whether the Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) process, RESTORE Act resources, economic damage settlements or other revenue streams – Florida should have a ready list of priorities. Each project should:

1. Include clear objectives with defined measures of success;
2. Be based on the best available science; and

3. Incorporate input from the public.

As the state develops a coastal master plan, it should work with other states in a coordinated approach to Gulf Coast conservation. Rather than rely on federal bureaucrats, Gulf Coast states need to take the lead to assume responsibility to preserve their own economic prosperity and environmental stewardship at the water's edge.

Louisiana's "Comprehensive Master Plan for a Sustainable Coast" is a model Florida should mimic in developing its own master plan. Updated every five years, Louisiana's 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. This methodical, preset plan demonstrates and effectively articulates the crucial interplay between the economy and the environment. Stakeholders across the board – including politicians, landowner groups, the business community and environmental advocates –all contributed to the plan's framework. In that respect, it transcends politics to focus on the challenges facing Louisiana's coast.

Florida and other Gulf Coast states without comprehensive coastal plans would be wise to use the research and planning opportunities in the FPL as a useful starting point to develop their own long-term visions for their coasts. Fortune has favored Florida over the record 10 years it has gone without a hurricane strike; 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,

Christian Cámara
Florida Director
R Street Institute