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With USDA Assistance, Private Landowners Play Pivotal Role Aiding Gulf Recovery

Auburn, AL, April 20, 2015 – In the five years since the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, America’s farmers, ranchers and forest managers have partnered with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to voluntarily help Gulf of Mexico ecosystems recover. Their proven conservation efforts on private lands have helped clean and conserve water, restore habitat and strengthen agricultural operations in the region.

“With USDA’s partnership, America’s producers stepped forward to help in a time of need,” Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said. “They created habitat for birds migrating south to provide an alternative to coastal habitats impacted by the spill, and they made conservation improvements to their farms, ranches and forests to help improve water, air and soil quality and restore habitats.”

Landowners in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida worked with USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to make conservation improvements on more than 22 million acres during fiscal years 2010-2014. An important part of this work was executed through targeted, landscape-level initiatives, such as the [Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative](#) (MBHI) and [Gulf of Mexico Initiative](#) (GoMI).

Just weeks after the spill, NRCS launched MBHI, an effort to aid landowners in creating alternative habitat for migratory birds. Landowners in an eight-state area created 470,000 acres of habitat for the millions of migratory birds, including ducks, geese and shorebirds, that travel the Mississippi Flyway each year to winter in Gulf of Mexico-area ecosystems, or in the case of many shorebirds, Central and South America. A [recent study by Mississippi State University](#) has shown the effectiveness of this effort.

NRCS launched GoMI in 2012 to accelerate conservation to Gulf-area watersheds most in need. This targeted work helped landowners trap and reduce runoff of nutrients and sediment, which can impair water quality, and restore habitat on about 60,000 acres during fiscal 2012-2014.

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“When we target voluntary conservation efforts to the places most in need, we see better results,” said Dr. William Puckett, State Conservationist in Alabama. “Landscape-scale natural resource concerns are most effectively addressed across boundaries, and our efforts like the Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative and Gulf of Mexico Initiative transcend farm, county, parish and state boundaries.”

A number of other landscape-level efforts enabled producers to improve quality of water and habitat downstream in the Gulf region, including the [Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative](#), [National Water Quality Initiative](#), [Everglades Initiative](#) and [Longleaf Pine Initiative](#).

In addition to this on-the-ground work with farmers, ranchers and forest managers, USDA collaborates with local, state and federal partners to aid Gulf recovery. USDA serves on both the Natural Resource Damage Assessment Trustee Council and the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council, providing technical assistance to both councils and working to broaden opportunities for voluntary private lands conservation. Additionally, NRCS partnered with National Fish and Wildlife Foundation last year, both committing \$20 million for projects to this year, and up to \$30 million in the next four years.

For more on technical and financial assistance available through conservation programs, visit www.al.nrcs.usda.gov/GetStarted or a [local USDA service center](#).

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