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Gulf oil spill restoration projects include hotel, ferries, boat docks



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Four years ago Sunday, the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded, killing 11 crew members and igniting the worst environmental disaster in American history.

Before the crisis was over, 4.9 million barrels of oil had spewed into the Gulf of Mexico. Scientists now believe it caused the deaths of pelicans, oysters, dolphins, coral and sea turtles, not to mention causing heart damage to bluefin tuna and deformities among shrimp, killifish and crabs. Globes of weathered oil continue washing ashore, and plenty more remains buried in the sediment offshore.

The company that leased the rig, BP, has handed out \$1 billion so far to make up for damage done in 2010. And what restoration projects are being planned for Florida?

Starting a ferry service. Building a boat ramp. Fixing a boardwalk. Putting solar-powered lights on a fishing pier. Things that don't really do much to improve the health of the gulf.

"There are some projects we don't see as helpful," said Cathy Harrelson of the Gulf Restoration Network, an environmental group, singling out the ferry service in particular. "These things really do need to be looked at."

It could be worse, she said. Alabama officials have approved spending \$85 million of BP's money for a hotel and conference center at a state park on the beach. The facility is supposed to replace one that was blown away by Hurricane Ivan in 2004 — damage that had nothing to do with the oil spill.

Louisiana and Mississippi have approved restoration projects too, but like Alabama and Florida have not chosen anything to repair gulf damage.

Instead, the focus has been on projects like Florida's ferry and boat ramps, both of which are intended to help



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BP has paid \$1 billion to help restore areas damaged by the 2010 gulf oil spill. Yet much of the money is funding projects such as ferries, boat ramps and a hotel and conference center.

tourists get to the beach and on the water. Those are "restoration" projects, because they "restore access," explained Kendra Parson of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

The boat ramps, for instance. There will be two new ones and two renovated ones, along with a dune restoration project, all in Escambia County, she said.

Those new and renovated boat ramps "are compensating for the lost access and increased use" during the disaster, she said. The crews BP hired to hunt for the oil washing ashore and clean it up took over the ramps then, blocking off all public access.

The ferry service is another example of restoring beach access and not the gulf's own health. The plan calls for buying three ferry boats to run between Pensacola, Pensacola Beach and the Fort Pickens portion of the Gulf Islands National Seashore.

To make it work would also require building "passenger queuing areas" and additional boat docks in Pensacola and Pensacola Beach. The National Park Service has built a dock at Fort Pickens "in support of this proposed project," a federal website on the project says.

As with the Alabama hotel, the ferry project is rooted not in the oil spill, but rather the spate of hurricanes that hit Florida in 2004 and 2005.

"The initial impetus behind the project was persistent damage to Fort Pickens Road due to storms, which made the Fort Pickens area largely unavailable to visitors," explained Nanciann Regalado, a spokeswoman for the Interior Department, which oversees the national parks.

To federal officials, using BP money to buy ferry boats and build docks counts as restoration because under federal law that term "can include not only projects to restore resources themselves, but projects to replace the loss of services, such as recreation, that the resources provided to the public," she said.

There are some projects being proposed that environmental groups don't question — \$1.7 million to buy coastal habitat on Escribano Point in Pensacola Bay, or paying Audubon \$3.2 million to restore shorebird nesting along beaches that were trampled by the BP cleanup crews. The closest any Florida project comes to repairing the gulf is a \$3 million proposal to launch a five-year study of the health of red snapper and other fish.

The reason why no state has proposed a so-called "deep-water" restoration project is simple: BP is embroiled in a lengthy trial in a federal court in New Orleans that could eventually yield billions of dollars in damages. Waiting for the bonanza expected from that trial "is holding up the deep-water projects," said Kara Lankford, gulf restoration program director of the Ocean Conservancy.

Part of the problem is psychology, she said. The damage done to the gulf is an unseen impact, "while the coast is so tangible, and you can see the restoration taking place there, so it's easier to get buy-in from the decision-makers."

To Lankford, though, the delay is a mistake: "If we all wait until that trial is resolved, it might be too late for some of these species."

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