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FIVE YEARS LATER: THE FUTURE OF RESTORATION AND RESEARCH



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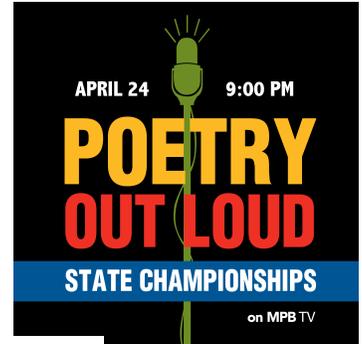
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The work to restore the Gulf of Mexico from the Deepwater Horizon drilling disaster is just beginning. As MPB's Evelina Burnett reports in the final part of our week-long series, what we know about the massive oil spill and its effects is also expected to grow.

"Good evening." Marc Wyatt, the director of oil spill restoration for the Mississippi Department of

Environmental Quality, welcomes more than 100 people to a meeting in February in Bay St. Louis.

It's one of the latest in a series of gatherings the agency has held as it plans how to use \$356 million of post-spill restoration funding from the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation, as well as other future restoration funding.

"We don't want to just pick a project here or there," Wyatt says. "We want look at the holistic effect of what's going on, and make sure what we do doesn't hurt something else and that what we do is for the greater good of the coast."

The National Fish & Wildlife Foundation is just one of several funding sources that is set to unleash a torrent of post-spill restoration dollars on the Gulf Coast. In Mississippi alone, some estimates put the amount of restoration money that will be seen at more than \$1 billion.

In a recent interview, Wyatt said the coast has only seen a sliver so far of what's to come in terms of restoration.

"I like to think that we have not even scratched the surface yet," he says. "Right now, we're getting the studies and all those projects done. But with the eco-restoration projects, the economic development projects - I'm thinking, in 10 years or more, the face of the Mississippi Gulf Coast is going to be completely different in a very good way."

Restoration money will also come from the Natural Resource Damage Assessment and from the Restore Act. Wyatt says ecosystem restoration could

span a variety of types of projects.

"It could mean different oyster projects," Wyatt says. "It could mean working on water quality for streams and looking at water quality going into the [Mississippi] Sound. Establishing wetlands. Living shorelines, creating those, trying to stop the erosion of the marsh."

Environmental groups have praised the agency for keeping the public involved in the planning process and for creating an [online portal](#) where anyone can submit project ideas, and all submitted project ideas can be seen by the public.

"We want to pat DEQ on the back. They've done a lot of things really well - this portal, the community conversations - they're trying to come up with good, innovative ways to engage with the public, and we love that," says Helen Rose Patterson with the Gulf Restoration Network.

She adds, though, they'd like to see more transparency in terms of how projects are ultimately chosen. "We've got this portal, where anyone can put a project in. But what happens once that project is in the portal? How is DEQ making decisions like - we're going to pick this project, and this project, and this project, and those are the ones we're going to propose to Restore. Citizens have no say in that, and no idea how it's happening, so that's got to shift dramatically."

A significant portion of the overall post-spill funding is also going to scientific research, and Mississippi hopes to play a role there too. University of Southern Mississippi Marine Science department chair Monty Graham says the

university has already been involved in scientific studies related to the spill. It's now preparing for an upswell in research on the historically under-researched Gulf of Mexico.

"We've trailed behind other smaller water bodies like the Chesapeake [Bay] or even the Great Lakes," he says. "So the application of moneys from the oil spill to further science in the Gulf of Mexico shouldn't be viewed as, we're feathering up our next. In effect what we're doing is trying to catch up."

Graham says research funding will come from the \$500 million dollar [Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative](#), as well as a 30-year, \$500 million program by the [National Academy of Sciences](#). In addition, the Restore Act will direct money to NOAA and to state-based research centers called Centers of Excellence.

"After 30 years, we ought to be able to look back and go, wow, we were there when the science of the Gulf of Mexico went from being in last place to being in first place," he says. "And we ought to know more about the Gulf of Mexico after 30 years than we know about any other body of water in the world."

Mississippi currently has a [request for proposals](#) out for its state research center. Those proposals are due back on May 7.

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