

**Verbal Testimony for
June 6, 2013 Hearing**

***Gulf Restoration: A Progress Report Three Years after the Deepwater
Horizon Disaster***

Presented by:

**Mayor George Neugent
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Good morning Mr. Chairman.

My name is George Neugent. I appear before this committee in my capacity as a member of the Executive Committee of the Gulf Consortium and Mayor of the Fabulous Florida Keys - also known as Monroe County, a political subdivision of the Great State of Florida.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony to the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation.

Thank you Senator Nelson for your participation in designing the unique and effective model of the RESTORE Act for the State of Florida; and, for the long-term, environmental and economic recovery of the Gulf Coast following the tragic and avoidable Deepwater Horizon catastrophe.

I am the proud son of a proud father who, like so many from that "Greatest Generation," worked his whole life for The Texas Co. - which became Texaco. I, too, like my Father, worked in drilling and exploration for oil & gas off the coast of Louisiana. As a former oil hand, I truly understand the national significance of our energy resources.

However, as one who now calls the southernmost out-islands of the continental U.S. home, I am keenly aware of the potential damage that the uncontrolled release of oil can do to the environment.

Senators, a very strong message must be sent to those who would attempt to cut corners to save a buck while recklessly risking tragedy for others. And, when events like Deepwater Horizon occur - the parties must be held responsible both civilly and criminally with prejudice for all damages they create.

Having lived my life on the Gulf of Mexico in both Louisiana and now Florida, I reflected on what I should say today; I was reminded of how much the Gulf has been a part of my life. As a young boy, going out to Terrebonne Bay to fish speckle trout and redfish with my dad and then sailing with my son, from my then home, Houma, La., to my now home, the Florida Keys 28 years ago.

Whether you live on Galveston Bay, in Terrebonne Parish, Biloxi, Mobile Bay or the Florida Keys, every community depends on good water quality and a healthy marine ecosystem for their future existence.

Let me be clear, our economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment.

NATIONAL TRAGEDIES CREATE UNITY.

The three-year-old Deepwater Horizon tragedy gives us an opportunity to reevaluate our efforts for marine conservation in the Gulf.

While the full impact of the spill on the Gulf's diverse ecosystems will not be known for years to come, scientists tell us that a spill of this magnitude will have profound unknown effects for years to come. Such effects in gulf coastal habitats are greatly exacerbated by decades of industrial-produced degradation of water quality. Reckless activity exhibited by Deepwater Horizon had immediate and devastating effects on Florida Panhandle economies.

It is important to note Florida's degree of coastal vulnerability. With almost 770 miles of coastline on the Gulf of Mexico, we compose almost half of the combined coastlines of the five Gulf States. And, although we are the only Gulf state that does not allow drilling -- and the only one that does not receive royalties -- Florida is nevertheless exposed to the devastating effects of oil spills in the Gulf.

It is because of the admitted negligence by BP and others that the RESTORE Act is so critically important to Florida.

Implementation of the RESTORE Act in my state is also unique.

Resources from what we call the local allocation will flow directly to 23 individual Gulf Coast counties. This allows Florida's communities at the local level to determine the investments needed for environmental and economic recovery.

RESTORE also creates and forms the Gulf Consortium as the "local consortia of political subdivisions" directed under the Act to develop the State Expenditure Plan.

Florida's 23 Gulf coast counties came together to legally form the Gulf Consortium and facilitate the development of the coordinated state plan that would enhance Florida's recovery through the prudent investment of 30 percent of the funds distributed. This part of the RESTORE Act gave Florida a distinct opportunity to create a partnership between local governments and the state to oversee the money coming to Florida and ensure a coordinated approach to identifying and funding projects that are the most beneficial to our environment and economy.

To achieve this, the Consortium is working with Florida's Governor and state agencies through a Memorandum of Understanding to advance common goals, reduce duplication and maximize benefits to the Gulf Coast Region.

This multi-jurisdictional collaboration in the development of the State Expenditure Plan meets the spirit and intent of the RESTORE Act, and underscores the commitment by the state, its local government and its citizens to work together, not as silos, but as partners for the full benefit of the entire coastline.

While we have accomplished much, there is still much to be done. The Consortium is ready to implement formal guidance from the U.S. Department of Treasury, which is critical in our ability to move forward with development of a comprehensive restoration plan.

The Consortium has made requests to Treasury that include:

- Acknowledging the Gulf Consortium as the "consortia of local political subdivisions" as specified in the RESTORE Act; and,
- Allowing for funds to be expended in the establishment of the Consortium and planning cost allowed to be reimbursed.

Establishing the Gulf Consortium has required sacrifice and trust, and we now stand ready to use the resources made available through the RESTORE Act to rebuild the Gulf Coast for the future of our families who were tragically impacted and who depend on a healthy environment and economy.

On behalf of the 23 Gulf counties bordering the Gulf of Mexico, the Gulf Consortium, and the Fabulous Florida Keys — I would like to thank Chairman Jay Rockefeller, Senator Wicker and especially my Senator, Senator Nelson, for convening this hearing and for stimulating thoughtful dialogue that can lead to collaborative and productive implementation of the federal RESTORE Act.