Keynote Address at "Beyond Recovery: Moving the Gulf Toward a Sustainable Future"

Washington, DC

February 9, 2011

The Honorable Jane Lubchenco, PhD

Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere and NOAA Administrator

As Delivered

- Thank you for that introduction, Mike.
- On behalf of Commerce Secretary Gary Locke and the 12,800 employees of NOAA, it is my pleasure to be with you today. My thanks to the Center for American Progress and Oxfam America for this opportunity.
- You may recall that the Deepwater Horizon oil spill began as our nation was celebrating the 40th anniversary of Earth Day.
- In 1970, the late Senator Gaylord Nelson called upon the American people to come together for a simple teach-in about the environment on a day he called Earth Day. Twenty million people gathered for that first teach-in.
- What Senator Nelson knew was that the *environment and the economy were inseparable.* His exact words were "Increasingly, we

have come to understand the wealth of the nation is in its air, water, soil, forests, minerals, lakes, oceans, scenic beauty, wildlife habitats, and biodiversity…*That's* the whole economy. *That's* where all the economic activity and all the jobs come from."

- Today, these words ring truer than ever before. We need look no further than the Gulf for proof. From its very first days, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill's impacts were felt far beyond the environment. The spill had rippling effects on livelihoods, businesses and human health, and communities.
- Late on a Friday night, 10 days into the spill, I met with over 100 fishermen in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana. Mostly charter boat operators, the fishermen were angry about the disaster, hungry for information, and anxious about their future. They stressed the need to keep oil out of the wetlands that nurture the larvae and juvenile fish they depend on for their livelihoods. Their connection to their bayous and Gulf waters was compelling; their fear for its loss was palpable.
- I tell this story because it highlights an important tenet of what NOAA is all about. The people in that room were looking to me, to us, to NOAA for information about the place they loved and relied on for their livelihoods, and they understood that their economic well-

being depended on understanding and preserving these valuable ecosystems.

- At NOAA, *our work is everyone's business*. Each and every day, American citizens and businesses depend on NOAA for the information they need to keep their families safe, their communities thriving, and their businesses strong.
- At NOAA, science forms the foundation of our work. Our research informs our many services and guides our stewardship of the coasts and oceans, ultimately benefiting citizens and businesses alike.
- By law, NOAA is the nation's lead science agency for oil spills.
- NOAA's role in oil spills and specifically the Deepwater Horizon spill is five-fold: to conduct and share science, keep seafood safe, protect wildlife and habitat, assess damage, and restore the natural resources injured as a result of the spill.
- This last role in restoration is the one I want to focus on given the topic of discussions today.

- I mentioned that the Deepwater Horizon oil spill occurred as we were recognizing the 40th anniversary of Earth Day. To commemorate that day, I was visiting a coral reef restoration project in the Florida Keys, one of 50 habitat restoration projects that NOAA

funded with the help of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

- What struck me there, and at many other projects I've visited, is the tangible role of ***environmental restoration as a catalyst for economic recovery***.
- NOAA invested 167 million dollars from the Recovery Act into restoration projects.
- Following a call to communities and organizations for proposals, we selected 50 from 814 shovel-ready project proposals. The fact that we received a total of $3 billion in requests for restoration projects highlights the immense demand and interest for habitat restoration.
- As of last fall, we had created 375 green jobs across the 50 projects. We expect that the projects to support another 1,000 direct jobs before they are completed.
- When complete, these projects will have restored more than 8,700 acres of habitat, opened more than 700 stream miles for fish to migrate and spawn, removed more than 850 metric tons of debris, and protected 11,750 acres to reduce threats to coral reefs – all in coastal areas around the U.S. And the restored habitats, in turn, will support and sustain fishing and tourism jobs and local communities.
- We can see tangible evidence of ***restoration for recovery,*** albeit on a small scale, in Bayou la Batre, Alabama, a small fishing community in

south Mobile County which has seen dramatic loss in fishery related jobs and income over the last 10 years due to declines of coastal wetland habitats and fishery resources, hurricanes, and of course most recently, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

- In Bayou la Batre, working in partnership with The Nature Conservancy, the Dauphin Island Sea Lab, and the University of South Alabama, NOAA is funding a Recovery Act project to install submerged breakwater reef along two stretches of shoreline, protect more than 18 acres of habitat for submerged aquatic vegetation, and create almost two acres of oyster reef.
- The project contractor, a Bayou la Batre native, who used to be an oysterman, and now owns local oyster processing plants, hired out-of-work oystermen to construct the reefs and assist in their deployment.
- Initial biological monitoring shows promising signs for fish and oysters at the site. Although, at first skeptical of restoration, the local contractor now boasts about the success of the reef, saying that his fishermen friends are catching large numbers of flounder in the vicinity of the reef.
- ***Restoration for recovery*** is *already working* in Bayou la Batre. And we have the opportunity to make it work in other parts of the Gulf Coast.

- One important vehicle for progress is the Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration (or NRDA) process.

- In the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, NOAA is one of three Federal trustees for the NRDA process, helping to identify and quantify short- and long-term impacts to the Gulf of Mexico's ecosystems from the spill. We work closely with the state trustees from the five affected states.
- The goal of NRDA is to compensate the public for injuries to natural resources and the lost use of the ecological services they provide. The Trustees consider restoration very early and often in the process. Injuries are balanced against, and directly scaled to restoration.
- NRDA combines science, economics and law. It is a restoration-focused legal process that must be conducted strategically.
- Within the first week of the spill, NOAA convened co-trustees to coordinate data collection activities in the Gulf of Mexico and across the five Gulf states for the NRDA process.
- As of January 20, NRDA teams had collected nearly 30,000 samples, including those collected by 89 offshore research expeditions. More than 10,000 analyses have been validated and made available to the public.

- This NRDA data collection provides the scientific foundation for the tools and targets to ***restore the health of the Gulf***, and in turn, provide *the catalyst to* ***recover Gulf communities and economies.***
- Just as we have seen with the Recovery Act projects, NRDA restoration projects have the potential to create green jobs, employing Americans to use their skills to restore damaged resources and strengthen their communities. And, in turn, those restored resources and habitats create more jobs down the road.
- But the economic returns from restoration extend far beyond jobs.
- When restoration of resources or increased access leads to increased use, we see it reflected in the market --- with more recreation trips, more money spent on travel, at restaurants, on hotels, and the list goes on.
- NRDA restoration projects will also provide ecosystem services, the environmental benefits that humans derive either directly or indirectly from healthy ecosystems.
- Often taken for granted, and rarely valuated, these ecosystem services provide foundational economic goods, often for the most vulnerable communities. Gulf Coast citizens rely on ecosystem services – such as hurricane protection, pollution control, provision of seafood and recreation, for preserving their safety, their livelihoods, and the vitality of their culture.

- *Restoring these environmental assets can generate substantial and multiple returns.*
- Soon, the NRDA trustees will begin the formal process of restoration planning. A first step in this process is the development of a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, to evaluate a range of restoration types that could be used to compensate the public for the environmental and human use damages caused by the oil spill.
- Public meetings are being planned in each of the five Gulf States over the next few months to seek input in the development of the restoration types.
- I encourage you all to participate in these meetings.

- The Deepwater Horizon oil spill is just one of the many stressors that have impacted the Gulf ecosystems over the years. A suite of stressors, both natural and manmade, have led to the degradation of the resources that millions of people depend on for their lives, livelihoods, and cultural heritage.
- The President recognized the broad issues facing the Gulf when he issued an executive order last October to establish a Task Force to coordinate Federal and state restoration efforts to address the historical degradation of the region's ecosystems.

- This integrated endeavor, under Lisa Jackson and John Hankinson's leadership, provides us with an unprecedented opportunity to build on the valuable planning efforts in various parts of the region, such as the work of Gulf of Mexico Alliance and the Louisiana-Mississippi Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Working Group, on which I participated.
- This is a tremendous undertaking with breathtaking opportunities for real change. It will require us to completely rethink how we manage the lower Mississippi River and put ecosystem sustainability on an equal footing with navigation and flood control as priorities for river management. It will also challenge us to consider the Gulf of Mexico ecosystems – coastal, nearshore and deepwater – in a holistic way, and reach out to our international partners with whom we share these resources.
- One of the most critical pieces of a long-term recovery and restoration plan for the Gulf is the availability of dedicated funds. It is important for Congress to act to divert Clean Water Act penalties associated with the spill to a dedicated fund to support restoration and recovery in the Gulf.
- We will have to consider other financing options as well, such as forging new public-private partnerships that promote the sustainable use of ecosystems and resources.

- The success of our restoration efforts will depend on our access to the best available science and the flexibility to respond to new knowledge, and the engagement of local knowledge and expertise.
- NOAA has extensive expertise within the agency, but we also rely on a strong connection to universities across the Gulf Coast through our cooperative institute program, and on local organizations through our various networks.
- Together, our research advances lead to greater understanding about the Gulf ecosystems and the development of new tools and technology to observe and monitor them. Long-term monitoring and research are critical to better understanding dynamic ecological systems, especially in light of climate change and ocean acidification, and the many ways our lives depend upon them.
- Long-term monitoring will also enhance the success of our restoration efforts by allowing us to evaluate progress and make more informed restoration decisions.
- This, too, requires dedicated funding. Congress must consider and fund long-term monitoring and research as an integral component of a restoration strategy for the Gulf.

- Finally, and I cannot emphasize this enough - our success depends critically on broad, public participation and engagement. The

President made clear that he wanted restoration plans to come from the Gulf to Washington, not the other way around.

- NOAA is committed to making information available and accessible to *all* communities. Just as we did during the response, we will continue to disseminate information through multiple venues – electronic and non-electronic formats, and in English and other appropriate languages. And we will continue to share our data and findings with the public and our academic colleagues, consistent with our pledge for openness and transparency.

- The Deepwater Horizon oil spill brought our reliance on healthy oceans and coasts into sharp focus. Human lives, livelihoods, and cultures are closely tied to the health and wellbeing of our ocean and coastal ecosystems.
- Now, more than any point in our nation's history, we appreciate that Healthy Oceans Matter. They matter to our personal happiness. They matter to the vibrancy of our coastal communities. They matter to our economic prosperity. And Healthy Oceans matter because they are a reflection of our commitment to one another and our collective future. The President's National Ocean Policy provides us with a framework to guide our actions.

- The task at hand in the Gulf is about **recovery** – *recovery of the environment, recovery of the economy, recovery of equity and recovery of the vibrant spirit of the citizens of the Gulf*. Reinvestment in the environment will give us jobs that help restore the shoreline and blue water habitats and hold the promise of revitalizing the economies and cultures of coastal communities for decades to come.
- As I noted, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill began as our nation was celebrating the 40th anniversary of Earth Day.
- How ironic, given that Earth Day was born out of the legacy of the Santa Barbara oil spill of 1969 and the environmental movement that led to so many important environmental laws, and the creation of NOAA and EPA. Those were powerful legacies of the Santa Barbara disaster and they prompt us to ask: what will be the legacy of this tragedy? What, indeed?
- And, so, I say to you:
- This is our challenge. We must come together to choose pathways to ensure the health and vitality of Gulf communities by focusing on achieving healthy, productive, resilient oceans and coasts – and we must choose them now. *The environment, the economy, and the cultural vibrancy of the Gulf depend on it.*