

Whale and Dolphin Action Plan for the Gulf of Mexico: A Five-Year Vision

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The Gulf of Mexico is a heavily utilized and industrialized ocean basin. It supports oil and gas development, commercial and recreational fishing, shipping, military operations, tourism, and a host of other human activities, all of which are increasing. The Gulf also recently experienced the largest oil spill in U.S. history, which left coastal and ocean habitats permanently altered. The Gulf continues to experience natural perturbations caused by coastal erosion and extreme weather events. Knowledge is lacking as to how these human-caused and natural events are individually or collectively impacting marine mammals in the Gulf. Efforts to address damages resulting from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill has resulted in multiple sources of funding to restore Gulf marine species, including whale and dolphin stocks affected by the spill. The restoration priorities identified by the Deepwater Horizon Natural Resource Damage Assessment Trustees for oil spill-affected stocks overlap to a large degree with priority research, recovery, and conservation actions for all 56 Gulf of Mexico whale and dolphin stocks. To leverage restoration efforts with ongoing research and monitoring efforts, a coordinated and cooperative approach is needed amongst Gulf entities. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), in partnership with other federal agencies working in the Gulf, has developed the Whale and Dolphin Action Plan (WDAP) to guide management, research, and monitoring activities across the Gulf. The primary audience for the WDAP is federal and state resource managers, Deepwater Horizon Trustees, academic and non-profit organizations, and funding entities. The plan provides a vision for priority actions that would restore, recover, and conserve whale and dolphin stocks in the Gulf, both nearshore and offshore. The broad dissemination and use of this "go-to" guide amongst managers and funders will facilitate greater cooperation and assurance that high priority research needs for whales and dolphins in the Gulf are being met.