

# 2024-2026 Strategic Plan

Ensuring a Vibrant Texas Coast and  
Gulf of Mexico for Future Generations

GULF of  
MEXICO  
TRUST





## Mission Statement

The Gulf of Mexico Trust advances the long-term sustainable use and conservation of the Gulf of Mexico by implementing pragmatic solutions that work for industry, the environment, and communities in Texas and the region. We unite and amplify Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi's work and our partners' voices to advance Texas' legacy of balancing economic growth with natural resource conservation.

## OUR STORY

The Gulf of Mexico Trust (GOMT) was founded in 2023 out of an understanding that the conservation community in Texas needed more science-based advocacy on the coast, and that a small team with a deeply committed board of directors could take a strategic and surgical approach to advancing policy solutions identified by the state's top scientists. GOMT was formed to connect community and state leaders, conservation organizations, and academia to advance specific priorities that will strengthen the Texas Coast and the Gulf of Mexico in the face of changing environmental conditions and honor the resilience long held by Texas' people and the ecosystems that support our way of life.



### **Why the Gulf of Mexico and the Texas Coast?**

The Gulf of Mexico is a complex ocean that is unique in that it is semi-enclosed, a multinational treasure of the Americas, a fish basket for North America, a center of global energy and chemical production, the receiving end of about half of all watersheds in the U.S., and a place rich with cultural significance, sea life, and coastal resources. The Texas Coast stretches nearly 370 miles, with several important bays and estuaries where fresh and salt water meet to support the life cycles and food webs of the Gulf's fish and wildlife. With population and innovative industries booming along the Texas Coast and the impacts of storms and extreme weather events intensifying due to environmental changes and rising seas, more attention must be directed to the region to ensure a sustainable future for people, fish, wildlife, and habitats.

## Developing Strategic Direction

GOMT has developed this strategic plan to express our vision and principles as an organization, outline our priorities over the next three years, and explain how we plan to work and grow the organization's structure by 2026. We will review our progress annually and anticipate updating and revising our strategic plan every three years. The plan provides a concise blueprint of the strategies required to achieve positive conservation and socio-economic outcomes for the Texas Coast and the Gulf of Mexico. This plan supplements and enhances research efforts by providing a Texas-based, science-backed view of coastal and Gulf of Mexico issues and highlights areas that require GOMT's focus to support the efforts of the larger conservation community.

### **GOMT has carved out four Focal Areas to meet this moment:**

1. Improve Coastal Habitats
2. Build Coastal Resiliency
3. Support Smart Energy Development
4. Ensure Best Available Science Informs Scaled Solutions



## Focal Areas, Goals, and Objectives for 2024 – 2026

GOMT’s strategic plan is centered on four Focal Areas with Strategic Goals and Objectives, the result of a collaborative visioning process in 2023 with Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (HRI), numerous stakeholders across the Gulf, and GOMT’s board of directors. It is important to note that GOMT will also be responsive to an ever-changing world and act on opportunities and challenges as they arise, always considering their relevance to each focal area. The substance of the plan is a series of objectives that define how we will make measurable progress toward our strategic goals over the next three years. GOMT will focus on objectives that are ambitious and measurable.

### 1 Improve Coastal Habitats

Protection and restoration of coastal habitats are key to the long-term sustainability of the Gulf region for people, fish, and wildlife. Resource protection, restoration, and science-based stewardship are urgent needs along the coast due to land loss as the result of subsidence and sea level rise and hydrologic regimes significantly altered to meet growth demands. A suite of solutions in regular rotation across the coast includes on-the-ground projects, outreach, education to relevant stakeholder groups and local leaders, and the advancement of resource knowledge from science-based mapping and planning. These are all essential approaches to ensure that these vital coastal habitats can remain intact and healthy for generations to come.

#### Goals

**1. Work with non-governmental organizations, natural resource agencies, and other stakeholders to identify, support, secure funding for, and implement on-the-ground projects and efforts that directly address coastal habitat degradation.**

#### OBJECTIVES

- ▶ Engage strategically in convening agencies and others to leverage knowledge and resources related to government research and monitoring efforts associated with programs that aim to improve coastal habitats and water regimes. Example efforts include habitat creation via artificial reefs with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), dune protection and wildlife-friendly beach nourishment efforts with the Texas General Land Office, and water quality standards and monitoring with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

- ▶ Work with project implementation groups and permitting agencies to improve the efficiency of beneficial use of dredge material permitting and the overall project development process, including identifying project locations.
- ▶ Work with conservation partners to support the projects and activities for protecting waterbird rookery islands by connecting project implementers with appropriate funding opportunities and ensuring that ongoing dialogue between stakeholders and regulatory agencies occurs by convening key players on an annual basis or at other strategic frequencies.
- ▶ Work with TPWD, water advocacy organizations, landowners, and other stakeholders to identify and assist willing sellers or lessors in transferring or leasing water rights to the Texas Water Trust to benefit the environment and coastal bays and estuaries.
- ▶ Allocate special attention to Baffin Bay, part of the world’s largest hypersaline lagoon, to equip existing stakeholder groups with sophisticated communications, policy advocacy strategies, and resources to represent the bay’s needs based on the best available science to various decision-makers and community members.

**2. Be a catalyst for developing new or updated resources and tools needed to identify the best available science related to the state of a particular species or natural resource or to inform innovative habitat restoration initiatives.**

#### OBJECTIVES

- ▶ Improve mapping of the nearshore marine environment of the Gulf of Mexico to track the status and future trends of critical habitat and

resources by developing a plan with TPWD for mapping oyster reefs, serpulid reefs, and seagrass beds.

- ▶ Elevate the science around natural carbon storage in blue carbon ecosystems (wetlands, seagrass, and mangroves) and other coastal areas by producing and disseminating a paper that synthesizes the latest science and evaluates opportunities and barriers to engaging in the carbon credit market to help inform decisions related to coastal resource management.
- ▶ Advocate for and convene a working group to support TPWD’s efforts to develop a comprehensive and up-to-date Texas seagrass program, including

a current Seagrass Conservation Plan, seagrass banking, nurseries, and restoration.

- ▶ Promote the need for better understanding and planning of protecting and restoring Texas’ wind tidal flats (low-lying, dry areas that can be underwater during high tide and flooding events).
- ▶ Plan and launch a Trash Free Gulf Campaign that can be scaled across Texas coastal counties and communities in a phased approach to connect youth, conservation, and civic organizations, elected officials, and industry partners in taking action to leverage beach cleanups and to support efforts to curb the outfall of trash into coastal waterways, bays and estuaries, and the Gulf of Mexico.

### 2 Build Coastal Resiliency

The health of coastal ecosystems and the safety of coastal communities are inextricably linked. For example, degraded coastal wetlands cannot provide nearby communities the same protection from coastal storms and flooding as healthy, intact wetlands. On the Texas Coast, contiguous wetland complexes, land protected from development, healthy oyster reefs, and living shorelines all play significant roles in the suite of natural assets that provide ongoing benefits to our communities on the coast. GOMT supports the shoring up of Texas’ natural assets on the coast and will pursue collaborative and balanced approaches to state and local policy and on-the-ground solutions that help ensure the coast will have the capacity to do more than rebound from challenges. Still, it will “bounce forward” as we confront issues like land subsidence, sea level rise, flooding, and population and economic growth.

#### Goal

**Promote nature-based and responsible solutions. Advance awareness of nature-based solutions – actions to protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural or modified ecosystems that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively – to help local, state, and national leaders make informed decisions that enhance coastal community resiliency. GOMT will work with partners to direct technical support and guidance to coastal communities and identify financial resources to enhance their resiliency.**

#### OBJECTIVES

- ▶ Improve understanding and increase the population of Texas’ native oysters while supporting the sustainable use of existing reefs, efficient construction of new habitat, and robust development of the mariculture industry by developing and presenting a plan to the Texas Cultivated Oyster Mariculture Advisory Board to improve the permitting and funding of oyster reef



restoration, new oyster reef construction, and commercial oyster farming.

- ▶ Enhance storm preparedness, mitigation, and resilience with nature-based solutions in Texas’ coastal counties by utilizing the Texas Coastal Resiliency Master Plan developed by the Texas General Land Office and meeting with county judges, commissioners, and planning staff to identify opportunities to pursue relevant funding programs for on-the-ground project implementation, as well as opportunities to incorporate these solutions into various plans like local hazard mitigation plans, regional and state flood plans, and others as strategic.
- ▶ Pay special attention to enhancing the capacity of rural coastal counties—often the areas richest in healthy coastal resources but lacking the capacity to participate in federal or state planning initiatives or pursue large funding opportunities—and connect their leadership with appropriate programs and advocates to access technical expertise and funds to shore up their coastal environments.
- ▶ By amplifying scientists’ recommendations to local decision-makers and project proponents, ensure that proposed desalination projects on the coast are designed to avoid harmful environmental impacts, particularly within sensitive marine environments.



# 3

## Support Smart Energy Development

The Gulf Coast is often considered the engine of the country and beyond. For more than a century, the upper Texas Coast and the broader Gulf region have been the center of global energy innovation and a leader in oil and gas development. In the last decade, the momentum to develop and grow the renewable side of our energy portfolio has grown remarkably. Currently, the beginning phases of making offshore wind energy development in the Gulf a reality are taking shape, with areas off the Texas Coast poised to have some of the greatest potential for leasing. With the federal government and private industry backing these efforts, how Texas fits in and frames its approach as a state is of utmost importance. In this space, GOMT will work to support smart energy development and innovative carbon capture and storage initiatives in the region that appropriately balance the needs of our economy and people with those of the marine and coastal ecosystems that support our cherished fish and wildlife.

### Goal

**Strategically work with the conservation community and other stakeholders to equip communities and governmental entities with science-based solutions to potential environmental impacts from energy and industrial infrastructure siting, support a comprehensive and efficient permitting structure, and lead Texas policymakers to make related decisions that prioritize coastal areas with significant conservation value for people and wildlife and minimize harm to the environment.**

### The Team and How We Work

GOMT is thoughtfully led by a dedicated group of conservationists that comprise its Board of Directors, an executive director who works strategically with scientists at HRI, and a small team of consultants. GOMT also actively seeks opportunities to collaborate with partner organizations to achieve its goals. In addition, GOMT is developing an expert policy committee to help advise the organization in implementing this strategic plan as it relates to policy positions and activities. Within the time frame of this plan, GOMT may add more staff capacity, but we aim to remain a lean organization and ensure that as much of our efforts are felt on-the-ground as possible.

### OBJECTIVES

- ▶ Prioritize the application of the best available science to better understand the benefits and risks of coastal wind and solar projects on and offshore. To better inform future development, compile existing wind and solar development citing research and make that information available to other conservation organizations.
- ▶ Collaborate with other organizations and stakeholders to gain and promote science-backed considerations and conclusions around the benefits, risks, and approaches to complex energy-related issues, such as:
  - hydrogen production, liquefied natural gas terminals, and the installation of new energy sources in the Gulf region;
  - environmentally responsible carbon storage in and under coastal landscapes in the Gulf region; and
  - best approaches to addressing the 14,000 unplugged oil and gas wells in the US waters of the Gulf of Mexico that pose a significant threat to the health of the marine environment, key fish species, and coastal communities.

#### Executive Director

**JAY KLEBERG**

#### President

**ANNE BROWN**

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**CARTER SMITH**  
**HERB STUMBERG**

#### Ex Officio Board Member

**DR. GREG STUNZ**

# 4

## Ensure Best Available Science Informs Scaled Solutions

The Gulf of Mexico region, and right here in Texas, is rich in cutting-edge science and the world’s top researchers developing the best information on issues important to its economic and environmental vibrancy. From responsible energy development, climate change, marine and coastal environments, natural resources, and species to social science and infrastructure – this information and data should be fully accessible to the public and inform appropriately scaled policy, planning, and decision-making that will impact the future of the Gulf.

### Goal

**Strategically disseminate—and at times commission—relevant research for decision-makers and policymakers to inform and further policies that promote a sustainable balance between economic and environmental health and spur and help facilitate needed planning and data sharing efforts where gaps exist.**

### OBJECTIVES

- ▶ Encourage state agencies to make relevant and timely coastal and water data and information publicly available, including archiving their sources with HRI’s Gulf Data Repository (GRIIDC).
- ▶ Establish long-term water quality monitoring efforts and plans specific to harmful algal blooms, sediment, salinity, and acidification to support conservation, mariculture, and human health decisions.
- ▶ Utilize science to engage the angler community and sustain healthy fisheries.
- ▶ Bring the latest science to the birding community to support and supplement their efforts to sustain healthy populations of migratory and colonial-nesting birds.
- ▶ Understand and create awareness of the ecological implications of development around sensitive coastal habitats (e.g., wind tidal flats, seagrasses, marsh, etc.).



### Process to Identify and Prioritize Objectives for Implementation

With a keen understanding that we need to act swiftly to move the needle on the four GOMT Focal Areas and be responsive to urgent matters when we have an important role to play over the next three years, we will make strategic implementation decisions based on the following steps:

1. Identify the challenge within GOMT’s four Focal Areas and evaluate specific Goals and Objectives.
2. Prioritize work based on the issue’s urgency using HRI’s Texas Coast Ecosystem Health Report Card, stakeholder input, and the best available information.
3. Develop a network map to identify the key players and the unique space and purpose that GOMT fills.
4. Identify the science or lack of research associated with the issue(s).
5. Determine the human, financial, and informational resources necessary to evaluate the challenges.
6. Build an internal work plan to understand the conservation and socio-economic needs, desired outcomes, geographic focus, implementation strategies, performance monitoring and evaluation, and budget.





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