

Testimony of Genevieve Genest  
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Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries

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## **Introduction**

Chairman Bentz, Ranking Member Huffman, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries. My name is Genevieve Genest, and I am the Donor Relations Manager for the Galveston Bay Foundation (GBF) in the Houston – Galveston Region.

I am here today to express my organization's support for H.R. 2950, the Coastal Habitat Conservation Act of 2023 and encourage the Members of this subcommittee to support it, as well.

GBF is a nonprofit that has served as the guardian of Galveston Bay since 1987. Our mission is to preserve and enhance Galveston Bay as a healthy and productive place, so it remains fishable and swimmable for generations to come. Our core programs areas include habitat restoration, land conservation, education, advocacy, and water protection. Through these programs we work across a 5-county area to facilitate a true cross-section of Bay interests by collaborating with recreational, commercial, and industrial users to find creative, inclusive, and forward-thinking solutions to the challenges confronting Galveston Bay.

Galveston Bay is the largest Bay in Texas and the 7<sup>th</sup> largest in the United States, covering 600 square miles. Its watershed covers 24,000 square miles and is home to more than 14 million Americans, including both Houston and Dallas. The Galveston Bay region supports billions of dollars in economic activity and 40% of the United States's base petrochemical capacity as the location of three major ports, including the port of Houston, the largest container port in the Gulf of Mexico.

As an estuary, Galveston Bay is one of the world's most productive ecosystems. Its coastal habitats provide numerous benefits to the greater Houston-Galveston community, such as supporting 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of Texas's fisheries industry, enhancing water quality through natural filtration processes, preventing property loss from erosion, providing flood and storm protection, and sustaining recreational and tourism industries that support more than 5,000 jobs.

Through actions and partnerships, including with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and a commitment to sound science and research, GBF has protected over 16,000 acres of natural lands and engaged tens of thousands of community members through volunteer and public outreach opportunities.

Additionally, Galveston Bay Foundation is a member of Restore America's Estuaries, an alliance of 10 coastal restoration organizations around the country working to protect estuaries, bays, and coasts and enhance the value of these areas for the ecosystem, economic, and national security benefits they provide. Many of these organizations are also beneficiaries and supporters of the Program I'm here to discuss.

### **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Coastal Program**

For more than two decades, GBF has worked closely with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Coastal Program to restore and protect more than 8,000 acres of critical coastal habitat in Galveston Bay. These projects support species conservation, habitat connectivity, and create more resilient communities. By conserving these habitats, GBF and the Service have been able to sustain ecosystem services and functions that are critical to coastal communities, including tropical storm protection, outdoor recreation, and nurseries for economically important fish and wildlife. Through these projects, the Coastal Program has invested more than \$570,000 and leveraged more than \$25 million in partner contributions for the Galveston Bay ecosystem and economy.

The Coastal Program has been a key partner for GBF both directly as a reliable source of financial support and indirectly as a powerful tool for accessing and leveraging additional private and public funding sources for high priority projects.

It also offers much more to GBF and our partners than just dollars. The Coastal Program has been an invaluable partner throughout the life of many projects as a go-to resource for expertise, technical assistance, and strategic advice. Program staff help foster collaboration among stakeholders and guide the project planning process, sometimes even when Coastal Program funds are not directly involved. All these services are at the disposal of partner organizations like GBF to help translate community needs into project ideas and execution.

### **Moses Lake Shoreline Protection Project (Texas)**

One example of the impact this technical expertise and financial support provides can be found at our Moses Lake Shoreline Protection Project. Between 2013 and 2015, the Coastal Program uplifted a partnership of federal and state agencies and NGOs, including the Galveston Bay Foundation and The Nature Conservancy, to construct a breakwater to protect 5,000 feet of rapidly eroding shoreline and support the restoration of 110-acres of wetland habitat in Moses Lake in western Galveston Bay.

This project included installing a rock breakwater, creating oyster reefs, and restoring marsh habitat, all of which provide significant benefits to fish and shellfish, migratory and resident waterfowl, and shorebirds. The project location is important to the region's commercial fishing industry and supportive of a wide range of recreational activities, such as fishing and boating, so there was a widely acknowledged need and desire to undertake a restoration project of this size.

Additionally, the wetlands in this area had been lost over time due to subsidence and erosion, and the breakwater project was designed to allow sediment to deposit and accumulate between the

protective barrier and the shoreline, elevating the bay bottom enough to enable marsh grass to take root and restore the ecosystem to a more natural state.

As a partner, the Coastal Program provided technical support and guidance, as well as \$125,000 in direct financial support for this project. GBF and our partners leveraged this initial investment to secure a nearly \$3 million National Coastal Wetland Conservation Grant for this project.

Following completion of the breakwater project, GBF was able to engage and educate local community and corporate partners in the habitat restoration process by organizing several successful volunteer-based marsh cordgrass plantings. In 2018, volunteers and students helped complete the planting of all 110-acres of marsh that will promote coastal resiliency, improve water quality, reduce coastal erosion and flooding, revitalize oyster reefs, and benefit federal trust species including interjurisdictional fish and migratory birds for decades to come.

Additionally, the project success prompted an adjacent private landowner to sell 100 acres to GBF to permanently protect wetlands near the restoration site in lieu of developing it, furthering the impact of the project. None of this would have been possible without financial and technical assistance from the USFWS Coastal Program.

In a region prone to tropical storms and hurricanes, an investment along our coast is not just about preserving ecosystems and enhancing recreational or commercial opportunities, they're also an investment in protecting the people and communities of Galveston Bay. Many studies have shown that healthy, intact ecosystems like oyster reefs, seagrass, and wetlands substantially reduce the impact of storms – protecting property, saving lives, and providing peace of mind.

### **Oyster Shell Recycling and Reef Restoration**

Additionally, the partnership with the Service has allowed us to expand our oyster shell recycling and reef restoration programs and engage public and private landowners to restore shoreline and protect lives and livelihoods from storms and flooding while also improving water quality. Galveston Bay used to supply 80% of Texas's oysters, but in the past 15 years, the Bay has lost more than 60% of its natural oyster reefs due to damage from overharvesting, trawling, disease, and natural disasters, like hurricanes. Healthy oyster populations are critical to the health of Galveston Bay as a whole. They filter pollution and provide shelter, food and breeding ground for baby oysters, crabs, shrimp, fish and other wildlife, and importantly, support the thriving commercial seafood industry upon which thousands of individuals and businesses depend.

In 2012, GBF launched an Oyster Shell Recycling Program which currently partners with over 30 local Houston-Galveston restaurants to collect their shucked oyster shells and return them to Galveston Bay as new oyster reef. To date, the program has diverted over 1,000 tons of oyster shells from landfills.

Much of the growth and success of our shell recycling efforts can be attributed to the Coastal Program. Coastal Program funding has enabled GBF to engage public and private partners, community and corporate volunteers, and students in three oyster reef construction and

restoration projects located in popular fishing areas that have experienced historical habitat and shoreline degradation over the years.

Coastal Program funds aided with collection and transportation of recycled oyster shells to the project sites. Over the course of the project, a total of 4,000 community and student volunteers helped build 2,200 feet of oyster reef to act as a natural breakwater for eroding shorelines, create new oyster habitat, and facilitate marsh restoration.

In total, funding and support received through the Coastal Program helped return 760 tons of oyster shells to Galveston Bay and restore 32,000 square feet of critical oyster reef habitat.

### **H.R. 2950 – Coastal Habitat Conservation Act of 2023**

The Coastal Habitat Conservation Act of 2023 would help build upon the successful record of accomplishment of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Coastal Program. The Program was developed in 1985 to protect, conserve, and restore coastal ecosystems with a primary focus on voluntary habitat conservation efforts on public and private lands through partnerships with various agencies, organizations, and landowners. Almost 40 years later, the Service works in 24 priority coastal areas and has engaged an extensive portfolio of diverse partners for the protection of priority species and habitats. In total, the Program has engaged more than 8,200 conservation partners to complete more than 4,900 conservation projects, improved more than 600,000 acres, and protected another 2.3 million acres of priority habitat and supported the downlisting of at least 15 species.

In 2022 alone, the Coastal Program provided \$4.3 million in support of 185 projects. This investment was leveraged with \$39.5 million in partner contributions; a staggering 1:9 ratio. The 223 project partners protected more than 31,000 acres of coastal habitat and restored an additional 13,000 acres.

However, funding for the Coastal Program has remained stagnant since at least 2014, with annual appropriations hovering between \$13 and \$14 million. H.R. 2950 would authorize and provide a much-needed boost for this critical program through fiscal year 2028, with funding increases to occur gradually over the five-year period. This funding increase would serve to expand existing partnerships, engage new partners, and further the mission of this highly effective, cooperative, voluntary program. Although funding has remained stagnant, demand from potential partners and for worthy and increasingly necessary projects has only increased, and approved priority coastal areas, such as the Columbia River Estuary and Georgia coast, remain unstaffed and under engaged despite the demand and need for projects and expertise.

With the passage of this proposed authorization, and increased funding, Galveston Bay Foundation and the countless partners of the Coastal Program could make serious headway towards further protecting vulnerable coastal ecosystems and communities in the face of severe storms, sea level rise, and pollution while also improving the economic output of the many industries that rely on them.

We would like to thank Ranking Member Huffman and Representative González-Colón for their leadership on this important legislation and we encourage the members of this Subcommittee to approve this needed authorization and funding increase. Thank you.