## Chris Robbins, Ocean Conservancy

Chris Robbins (Senior Restoration Planner for the Ocean Conservancy's Gulf of Mexico Restoration Program) is working with colleagues to monitor the BP Deepwater Horizon Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) and to influence the related restoration planning process now underway.

### WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE EARLY RESTORATION PROCESS

*On April 21, 2011, the natural resource trustees for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill announced that BP had agreed to provide $1 billion in funding for early restoration projects, which will address injuries caused by the spill on an accelerated timeline. The goal is to start these projects in 2011 and 2012.*

**ELI: How would you describe early restoration?**

**Chris:** Essentially, early restoration is an opportunity for the federal and state trustees to conduct environmental restoration before a final natural resource damage claim is developed and presented to the responsible party (e.g., BP) and before any settlement has been reached, which could be quite some time from now. So, it is really an opportunity to get restoration going early and accelerate the process of returning injured resources to the condition they were in before the oil disaster.

**ELI: You say that early restoration would happen before a restoration plan is in place. How do you balance that with not knowing what the damage is to the ecosystem?**

**Chris:** One of the challenges in applying funds towards early restoration is not knowing the type, extent, and significance of the injuries that have occurred to natural resources and ecosystem services. So, the early restoration process is requiring the trustees to think very carefully about how they use these funds because BP, as part of the early restoration

agreement, is receiving credit for the funds they spend on early restoration.

Also, the injuries to natural resources and ecosystem services have not been disclosed in a detailed way to the public, so the public is at a disadvantage even more than the trustees because that information has not been released in a way that they can then use to suggest restoration projects.

**ELI: Given this lack of information, how is the public supposed to participate in early restoration?**

**Chris:** Based on the information that has trickled out, we know that there are wildlife mortalities. These include oiled sea turtles, birds, and marine mammals that have likely died as a result of oil exposure. We also know that various types of habitats have been oiled – from salt marshes to beaches to estuaries to intertidal habitats to sea grasses to ocean waters. In addition, human uses such as fishing and swimming were impacted. This information is found in the trustees' [Notice of Intent to Conduct Restoration Planning](). Based on observational evidence, emergency

restoration projects, and the [types of studies](#) the trustees are conducting, we also have good reason to believe that other marine habitats like seaweed and deep-sea corals were exposed to oil. So, in a broad sense, we understand what habitats and wildlife species have been exposed and probably injured so far. But a lot more is unknown. So, the public is in the difficult position of taking what is known generally about injuries and deciding what restoration projects to propose.

**ELI: What do you anticipate the process for early restoration will look like?**

**Chris:** The early restoration that is taking place here is unprecedented, in terms of the amount of money and the number of actors involved. Each of the state trustees is making an effort to solicit ideas for restoration projects from the public. Some state agencies are holding public meetings to give the public an opportunity to share their ideas. State agencies and the federal trustees have also set up web portals through which the public can submit restoration projects**.**

In addition to soliciting restoration ideas, the federal trustees, and to some extent the states, need to give the public an opportunity to comment on the projects that the trustees are considering. They are required to do this under the law. So, in the next few weeks, we will probably see efforts by the federal trustees to engage the public more aggressively in commenting on proposed restoration projects.

**ELI: What types of early restoration projects are the trustees looking for?**

**Chris:** The trustees are looking for highly implementable restoration projects. They are not looking for concepts, but for projects that

are concrete and ready to be implemented on a short time frame (within 6 months to a year).

**ELI: In addition to providing ideas and comments on restoration projects, are there other ways the public can participate?**

**Chris:** There are. The public can write letters to the editor, or write op-ed articles. They can also use the media to support desirable restoration projects or oppose inappropriate ones. Also, if there are members of the public who are in a position to ask their local, state, or federally-elected officials to weigh in on their behalf, they can ask those officials to write letters, recommending that a particular project be considered by the trustee agencies.

**ELI: Do you have any advice for members of the public who want to participate in the early restoration process?**

**Chris:** If there are members of public that have similar interests, they would be better off if they band together and submit their projects or speak up as a group. This is also true for writing letters to the editor, op-ed articles, and engaging the media. People that band together will likely have a louder voice than they would otherwise have on their own.

**ELI: How can the public find out more information about the process?**

**Chris:** The [NOAA website](#) is a great site where you can access information on early restoration. Each of the state trustee agencies also has its own website set up, where you can learn more about what those individual state trustee agencies are doing to engage the public and solicit ideas for early restoration projects.