

REQUEST FOR GOVERNOR'S SUPPORT OF THE LOWER LAGUNA MADRE ESTUARY PROGRAM OF SOUTH TEXAS

Development of a Strategic Plan

Description: Cameron County, Texas, has partnered with the Institute for Sustainable Energy & the Environment (ISEE) and Texas A&M University Kingsville to establish the Lower Laguna Madre Estuary Program (LMEP) to protect and restore coastal water resources on the South Texas coast (Figure 1). Cameron County, Texas A&M Kingsville and ISEE are urging the Governor's support for the planning and development of a Strategic Plan for the Lower Laguna Madre as an "estuary of national significance". This support will strengthen the opportunities to seek federal, state and local grant funding and to motivate stakeholders' participation during the planning process. Identifying local funding sources will be a key component of the Strategic Plan. The completed Strategic Plan will be utilized to pursue the USEPA's National Estuary Program (NEP) designation within the next five (5) years. The NEP was established under the 1987 Clean Water Act (CWA) Amendments as a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) program to "restore and maintain the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the estuary, including restoration and maintenance of water quality, a balanced indigenous population of shellfish, fish, and wildlife, and recreational activities in the estuary, and assure that the designated uses of the estuary are protected." The NEP is comprised of a network of 28 voluntary place-based organizations across the nation that model ecosystem based management. An "estuary of national significance" is an estuary whose estuarine waters, natural ecosystems, and economic activities were deemed by Congress to be critical to the environmental health and economic well-being of the nation. While some estuaries were designated "estuaries of national significance" by Congress when the legislation was enacted, other estuaries are eligible for inclusion in the NEP through a nomination process, with nominations submitted to EPA by the Governor of a state where the estuary is located. The last estuary designation was made in 1995 when EPA's Congressional appropriation provided funding for support of the Coastal Bend Estuary Program in Corpus Christi, TX. On April 10, 2015, Cameron County passed a resolution establishing the Laguna Madre Estuary Program, and the County and ISEE now seek the Governor's support of the program.

Relevance and Background: The reauthorization of the NEP Act is scheduled for consideration in 2020. The project team would like to be in a position to be considered for NEP designation by this time. If the designation is granted, the LMEP will become eligible for federal appropriations under Section 320 of the Clean Water Act. According to the EPA, National Estuaries have attracted over \$7.5 billion in federal and non-federal funding resources since 2003 (Coastal Texas 2020). The EPA and the TCEQ have respectively labeled Gulf of Mexico Estuary programs and the Bahia Grande Coastal Corridor as high priority regions (TCEQ 2014, EPA 2014). The establishment of the LMEP will position Texas to have three (3) estuary projects eligible for RESTORE funding. In 2012, Congress passed the bipartisan RESTORE Act, which dedicates 80 percent of Clean Water Act administrative and civil penalties paid by the responsible parties after the date of enactment of this Act in connection with the Deepwater Horizon explosion and spill to the Gulf of Mexico for ecological and economic recovery efforts. This law will generate investments in economic development, tourism, promotion, and science-based natural resources

restoration in the states hardest hit by the spill – Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas.

The EPA's Gulf Coast Estuary Program RESTORE project proposal is reviewed and considered for funding annually under the Bucket 2 criteria. The proposal includes the Lower Laguna Madre region as a vital estuary. Support for this proposal, and in particular the LMEP, would insure opportunities to receive funding from the RESTORE program.

If designated as an estuary of national significance, the LMEP can access funding to enhance the area's ecosystem, improve water quality in streams and estuaries, provide flood mitigation, improve public health through management of bacterial impairments, and other similar projects. An important benefit arising from a thriving LMEP can be well-planned coastal economic growth through ecotourism and green infrastructure construction industries for stormwater wetlands, bioswales, green roofs, pervious pavements and other types of green building projects. This aspect of a successful LMEP has the potential for sustainable job growth for economically disadvantaged South Texas. For these reasons, Cameron County, ISEE and Texas A&M Kingsville propose to establish the LMEP, a third estuary program in Texas.