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Gulf's health only fair to poor

Alliance working on master plan

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BILOXI - Government officials laid out the beginnings of an ambitious plan to restore the Gulf Coast's natural resources and improve the Gulf of Mexico's health to an audience of about 100 in Biloxi on Wednesday.

They also took recommendations from the audience for problems that need to be addressed by the five states, 13 federal agency partners and stakeholders that compose the Gulf of Mexico Alliance.

Several speakers said the project would work to make the Gulf better than it was before the 2005 hurricane season.

"The goal is to restore natural lands to pre-Camille levels," said Bill Walker, the director of Mississippi's Department of Marine Resources, one of the agencies in the alliance. "If we only get back to pre-Katrina levels, then we will have failed."

Walker said that on the state level, Gov. Haley Barbour is trying to get \$7.5 billion from Congress to fund a coastal restoration plan.

Speakers, who came from Mississippi and Alabama, mentioned several threats to the Gulf that demand the attention of the alliance, including an overabundance of nutrients from rivers draining into the Gulf and knocking natural balances out of whack, poor water quality and plant and animal habitat loss.

"The biggest problem is population growth on the Coast," said George Crozier with the Dauphin Island Sea Lab, another alliance partner. "We need to balance growth with maintaining natural areas. We are in trouble in every aspect of the Gulf. Reports have said the Gulf is in fair condition. In reality, its state is fair to poor."

Gloria Car, with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Gulf of Mexico Program, said the Gulf's health affects national economics along with environmental issues.

Amy King, with Alabama's Department of Conservation, was encouraged by the alliance meeting but said that conservationists need to work hard on educating the public.

"If the general public and developers don't understand what you are doing, it won't work," King said. "Education is the thing that threads all of the important priorities together."

The results of the Biloxi alliance meeting will be presented during March's regional workshop in Corpus Christi, where all of the states, federal partners and stakeholders will get together to draft a master plan of action.

"This is a huge opportunity that we need to work very hard to take advantage of," said Walker. "The alliance allows us to think on a broader scale. What can we do to make the Gulf of Mexico a better place?"

Gulf of Mexico by the numbers

Percentage of rain, ice and snow falling on America that winds up in the Gulf of Mexico: 80

Percentage of American rivers that flow into the Gulf: 66

Percentage of total American oysters coming from the Gulf: 70

Percentage of total American shrimp coming from the Gulf: 68

Percentage of total American recreational fisheries on the Gulf: 40

People fishing the Gulf every year: 3 million

Number of the top ten American ports along the Gulf: 7

Economic yearly value of the Gulf: \$20 billion

- EPA GMP

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