Chapter A. Introduction to Emergent Wetlands

Status and Trends in the Northern Gulf of Mexico: 1950–2010

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*Note: This report is a joint effort of the U.S. Geological Survey and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The chapters of the report will be posted incrementally to this website as they are completed so that we may provide decisionmakers with information as timely as possible.

Emergent Wetlands Status and Trends in the Northern Gulf of Mexico: 1950–2010

Contents

Abstract

Throughout the past century, emergent wetlands have been declining across the Gulf of Mexico. Emergent wetland ecosystems provide a plethora of resources including plant and wildlife habitat, commercial and recreational economic activity, water quality improvement, and natural barriers against storms. As emergent wetland losses increase, so does the need for information on the causes and effects of these losses, for emergent wetland mapping, for monitoring and restoration efforts, and for increased education.

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Gulf of Mexico Program Office (EPA GMPO) are committed to providing the best science to restore, enhance, and protect these important ecosystems. The Emergent Wetlands Status and Trends Report is a continuation of the completed Seagrass Status and Trends in the Northern Gulf of Mexico Report (Handley and others, 2007), both of which serve to update the EPA GMPO Status and Trends of Emergent and Submerged Vegetated Habitats of Gulf of Mexico Coastal Waters, USA Report (Duke and Kruczynski, 1992). The Emergent Wetlands Status and Trends Report is also part of the Gulf of Mexico Alliance Ecosystems Integration and Assessment Priority Issue Team's work plan to provide resources that will aid in the ecological and economic enhancement of the Gulf of Mexico region. The purpose of this report is to provide scientists, managers, and citizens with valuable baseline information on the status and trends of emergent wetlands along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. The study upon which this report is based examines the emergent wetlands of eight individual estuarine areas within the northern Gulf of Mexico region and presents statewide summaries for Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida. Each estuarine area is detailed in vignettes that address current status and historical trends of estuarine and palustrine emergent wetlands, emergent wetlands mapping and monitoring, causes of status change, restoration and enhancement activities, background information for the study area, and the methodology employed to analyze and document the historical trends and current status of emergent wetlands.

The eight individual estuarine areas examined in this report are

- Corpus Christi/ Nueces/Aransas Bays, Tex.
- Galveston Bay, Tex.

- Barataria/Terrebonne Bay, La.
- Mississippi Delta, La.
- Mississippi Sound, Miss.
- Mobile Bay, Ala.
- Florida Panhandle, Fla.
- Tampa Bay, Fla.

Introduction

The Gulf of Mexico provides a wide array of valuable natural resources to the Nations that border its shores. As understanding of the value of the Gulf Coast ecosystem grows, it becomes increasingly important to invest in its conservation. Reductions in both abundance and diversity of various organisms and habitats emphasize a critical need to protect these natural assets, many of which serve vital ecological functions. In response to growing trends of habitat degradation, several agencies, organizations, and institutions have begun to act together with local residents to address these issues. One such effort is the Gulf of Mexico Alliance (hereafter, the Alliance), a cooperative program between the Gulf States and Federal, local, and international partners, which aims to enhance the ecological and economic health of the Gulf of Mexico by significantly increasing regional collaboration. In 2009, the Alliance partners released the Governors' Action Plan II, which identifies problems facing the Gulf of Mexico and potential goals and strategies to address these problems (Gulf of Mexico Alliance, 2009). One of the Alliance's goals was to develop an Emergent Wetlands Status and Trends Report for the Gulf of Mexico so that scientists and decisionmakers will have the appropriate knowledge and resources to make critical decisions about wetland management, conservation, and restoration. As members of the Gulf of Mexico Alliance, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and the Environmental Protection Agency's Gulf of Mexico Program (EPA GMPO) have engaged in multiple projects, such as the completed Seagrass Status and Trends in the Northern Gulf of Mexico Report (Handley and others, 2007) and as a continuation, the Emergent Wetlands Status and Trends in the Northern Gulf of Mexico Report. These projects will aid in the restoration, improvement, and protection of the coastal habitats within the northern Gulf of Mexico region.

The northern Gulf of Mexico region consists of those waters lying adjacent to the States of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida. This region encompasses over 2,414 kilometers (km) (1,500 miles [mi]) of coastline and is home to more than 25 million human residents (Handley and others, 2007). Marine and estuarine wetland ecosystems such as sandy beaches, freshwater and saltwater marshes, mangroves, coral reefs, and seagrass beds combine to create important coastal habitats that allow this region to flourish. The Gulf of Mexico contains approximately 50 percent of the Nation's salt marshes (Duke and Kruczynski, 1992; Dahl, 2006; Gulf Alliance, 2009); however, natural and human-induced

impacts—such as hurricanes, sea-level rise, and modern land development practices in the gulf coast region—threaten these aquatic habitats, risking the economic values that form the foundation of the coastal communities.

Wetland habitats of the northern Gulf of Mexico region, especially, have significantly declined in quantity and quality. Wetland loss has been occurring at an alarming rate in all the Gulf States throughout the past century. This loss remains a threat to preserving not only the ecological integrity of the Gulf of Mexico but also the thriving coastal communities and industries on the Gulf Coast. All wetlands are decreasing across the Nation, particularly in the Gulf of Mexico (Couvillion and others, 2011). More than half of the approximately 87,007,400 hectares (215 million acres) of wetlands present at the founding of the country have disappeared, and most of the historical losses were caused by development and conversion to agricultural lands (Duke and Kruczynski, 1992). Over 3,642,000 hectares (9 million acres) of wetlands were lost between the 1950s and 1970s. The Gulf of Mexico coastal area lost approximately 160,580 hectares (396,800 acres) of freshwater vegetated wetlands and 18,385 hectares (45,430 acres) of estuarine vegetated wetlands between 1998 and 2004 (Stedman and Dahl, 2008). Louisiana is losing 42.92 km^2 (16.57 mi^2) of coastal wetlands every year (Couvillion and others, 2011).

Some of the causes behind this loss and reduction of quality include subsidence (compaction and sinking of soil, frequently caused by construction of dams and diversions of natural water flow), erosion, saltwater intrusion, sea level rise, construction, and development (Duke and Kruczynski, 1992). Alterations to wetlands and river systems—such as construction of levees, canals, and channels, dredging and dredge spoil disposal, draining, and filling—are common and alter wetland ecosystem processes, eventually leading to wetland loss. As wetland area decreases, hurricanes and storms reach farther inland, causing damage and erosion that perpetuate the cycle of further wetland loss.

Definitions, Functions, and Benefits of Wetlands

Coastal wetland habitats are highly productive ecosystems that connect land and sea (see Figures 1 and 2). Wetlands are defined as “lands transitional between terrestrial and aquatic systems where the water table is usually at or near the surface or the land is covered by shallow water…[with] one or more of the following three attributes: (1) at least periodically, the land supports predominantly hydrophytes; (2) the

substrate is predominately undrained hydric soil; and (3) the substrate is nonsoil and is saturated with water or covered by shallow water at some time during the growing season of each year" (Cowardin and others, 1979, p. 3). Wetlands can include such diverse ecosystems as estuarine, riverine, lacustrine, and palustrine habitats and can be characterized by rocky bottoms, aquatic beds, shores, moss-lichen wetlands, scrub-shrub wetlands, forested wetlands, or emergent wetlands. Emergent wetlands are "characterized by erect, rooted, herbaceous hydrophytes, excluding mosses and lichens, [which are] present for most of the growing season in most years" (Cowardin and others, 1979, p. 19). Some plants commonly found in emergent wetland habitats along the gulf coast include smooth cordgrass (*Spartina alterniflora*), gulf cordgrass (*Spartina spartinae*), saltmeadow cordgrass (*Spartina patens*), and saltgrass (*Distichlis spicata*).

Figure 1. Salt marsh in Chandeleur Islands, Louisiana.

Figure 2. Fresh marsh in Lafitte, Louisiana.

Emergent wetlands provide great value to the natural environment. They supply habitat—including food, cover, breeding and molting grounds—and other life requirements for a multitude of species, many of them threatened or endangered (Duke and Kruczynski, 1992). The natural filtration processes of emergent wetlands remove significant amounts of substances such as excess nutrients, organic pollutants, and suspended particulates from inland water as it flows out to sea. The extensive nutrient processing and cycling that occurs in emergent wetlands add detritus to the ecosystem, nourishing the environment and enabling marsh accretion. Emergent wetlands act as a barrier to flood waters, storm surges, and wind damage, reducing inland destruction and land loss from storms, hurricanes, and other natural events. In Louisiana, research indicates every 4.3 km (2.7 miles) of wetlands reduce storm surge by 0.3 m (1 ft; USACE, 1963).

Emergent wetland habitats support human communities, recreation, and economic activities throughout the Gulf of Mexico. Emergent wetlands help maintain the production of the commercial and recreational fisheries industries in the gulf by providing critical habitat for recreational and commercial

fishes. They contribute in large measure to many of the ecological and economic benefits that gulf wetlands provide to the local communities and industries. Eighty-five to ninety-five percent of fishes caught recreationally or commercially in the gulf spend at least part of their life in gulf wetlands (Duke and Kruczynski, 1992). Commercial fishing generates $667 million in revenue annually in the gulf and supplies over 1.3 billion pounds of seafood (National Marine Fisheries Service, 2007). Recreational fishing is a multimillion dollar industry in the gulf, attracting residents and tourists to chartered boats, marinas, hotels, restaurants, and tackle shops. Tourism and recreation provide over 620,000 jobs in the Gulf of Mexico region (National Ocean Service, 2008). Twenty-seven percent of domestic crude oil production occurs in the Gulf of Mexico, and 6 of the 10 leading U.S. shipping ports are located in the gulf. Additionally, emergent wetlands provide a barrier against storm surges and heavy winds, which protects communities from hurricanes and other natural events across the gulf region.

Despite the diverse values that emergent wetlands bring to the natural environment and to society, their economic value is not yet clear. Various economic models have determined values ranging from $1,000 to $82,000 per acre (Duke and Kruczynski, 1992). The worth of the annual rate of loss of wetlands in Louisiana has been calculated to range between $77 million to $544 million (Costanza and others, 1989). This disparity exists because of the variety of wetland types and the quality of and differences between economic models, theories, and estimates. Members of the Alliance are developing more accurate and precise socioeconomic values for all wetlands and other coastal habitats in the gulf, which will assist managers and policymakers in decisions regarding wetland habitats.

Conservation Efforts

The Alliance chose six priority issues upon which to focus conservation efforts: (1) water quality, (2) habitat conservation and restoration, (3) ecosystem integration and assessment, (4) nutrients and nutrient impact, (5) coastal community resilience, and (6) environmental education (National Ocean Service, 2008). The Governors' Action Plan II (Gulf of Mexico Alliance, 2009) identifies problems, goals, and strategies for achievement for each of the six priority issues and "action item" projects for their respective Priority Issue Teams. The Ecosystem Integration and Assessment Priority Issue Team identified the need for an emergent wetlands status and trends report as one of its action items so that scientists and

decisionmakers will have the appropriate knowledge and resources to make critical decisions about emergent wetland management, conservation, and restoration. The USGS and the EPA GMPO elaborated upon this need to include the following goals:

- Update the 1992 EPA report "Status and Trends of Emergent and Submerged Vegetated Habitats, Gulf of Mexico, USA" (Duke and Kruczynski, 1992).
- Define the extent of emergent coastal wetland habitats and how they have changed through time.
- Provide baseline data on emergent wetlands for other Gulf of Mexico Alliance priority teams' uses.
- Support efforts to monitor and research emergent coastal wetland habitats through future routine efforts.
- Update the ecological, economic, and cultural importance of these habitats.

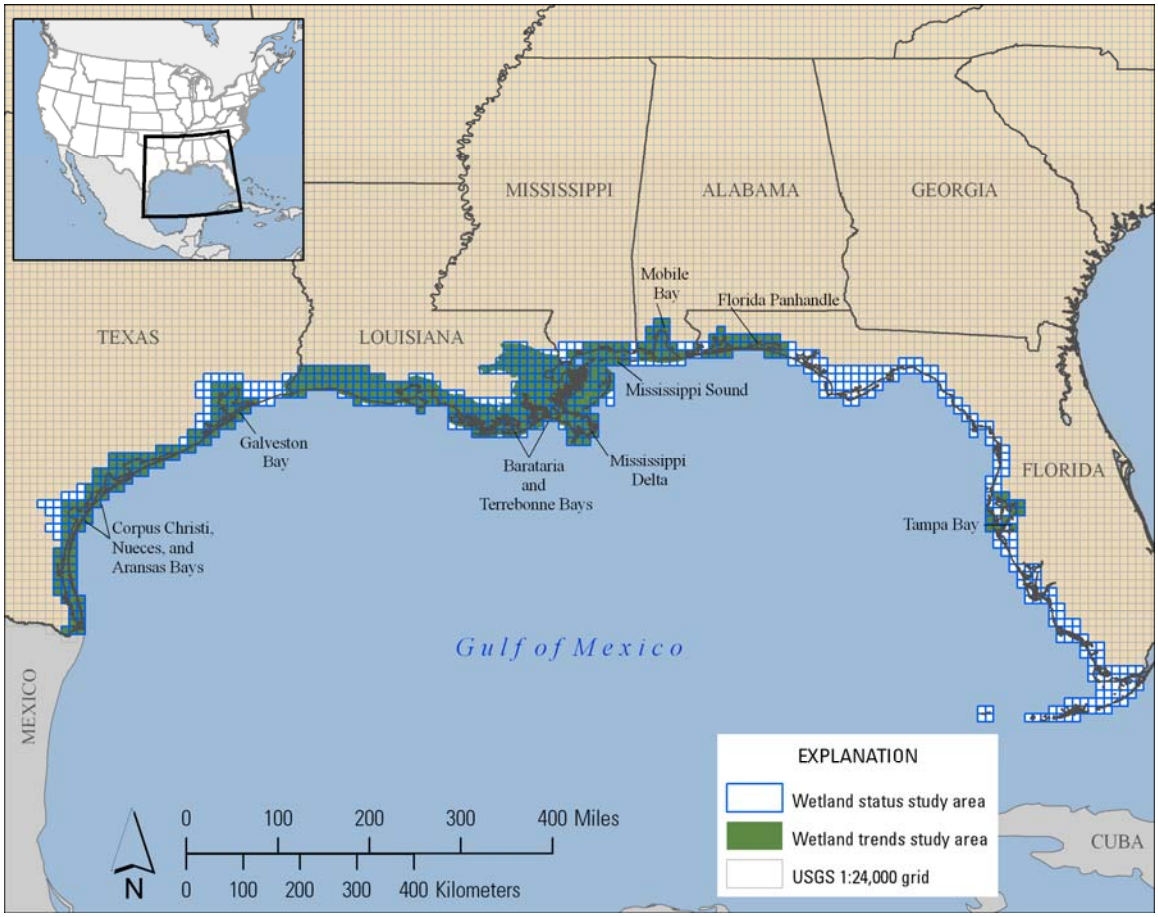
To meet these objectives, existing gulf wetland habitat data had to be evaluated to determine emergent wetland coverage changes over time, the culmination of which is this report.

Emergent wetlands throughout all five Gulf Coast States are examined in this report. Within the five States, eight emergent wetland areas have been selected for more detailed investigation. These eight areas are described in this report in individual vignettes. Scientists and resource managers researching these wetlands coordinated their sampling, monitoring, and reporting efforts to develop a comprehensive review of historical and current wetland habitat coverage and the significant threats to continued wetland existence. The data availability and mapping methodologies that are used in this report are explained in greater detail in the following section. The areas of emergent wetlands examined in this report include the following (see Figure 3):

- statewide summaries of emergent wetland coverage of all five Gulf of Mexico Coast States;
- Corpus Christi/Nueces/Aransas Bay region;
- Galveston Bay;
- Barataria–Terrebonne Bay;
- Mississippi Delta;
- Mississippi Sound;
- Mobile Bay;

- the Florida Panhandle along the northwest Florida coast; and
- Tampa Bay.

Figure 3. Study areas and local estuarine systems described in this report.



This report builds upon the EPA report "Status and Trends of Emergent and Submerged Vegetated Habitats, Gulf of Mexico, U.S.A." (Duke and Kruczynski, 1992). It is one of the first steps of the USGS, the EPA GMPO, and other Alliance partners to implement a comprehensive strategy for restoring emergent wetland habitats. This report also complements the USGS–EPA report "Seagrass Status and Trends in the Northern Gulf of Mexico" (Handley and others, 2007). Scientists, managers, and citizens will find essential baseline information about the current status of emergent wetland habitats in the Gulf of Mexico in this report. Throughout the report, data availability, mapping methodologies, and gulf ecological areas will be discussed in greater detail. Detailed backgrounds of each emergent wetland habitat and geographic region

are discussed, along with current estuary status and trends, gulfwide status and trends, and recommendations for continued restoration of emergent wetland habitats in the northern Gulf of Mexico.

Methodology and Data Used

Type of Data: Aerial Photography

The emergent wetlands status and trends reported in this study are based primarily on coastal wetland data from the National Wetlands Inventory (NWI) and the USGS National Wetlands Research Center (NWRC). These data are derived from high-resolution aerial photography. Black and white, natural color, and color infrared aerial photography are used, depending on availability for each time period and location.

The use of high-resolution aerial photography in this report differs from that in wetlands status and trends reports that utilize Gap Analysis Project (GAP) data, Coastal Change Analysis Program (C-CAP) data, and National Land Cover Data (NLCD) in that those data are from 30-meter (m) (98.4 feet [ft]) resolution Landsat satellite imagery (Environmental Protection Agency, 2007). Aerial photography allows identification of small areas of wetland habitat loss or change, while Landsat data do not. Shoreline erosion is also difficult to detect in Landsat data because long, narrow features are not clearly identified at 30-m resolution. This lack of detection is problematic for analysis of wetland habitat loss because shoreline erosion is a major agent of wetland loss in some coastal areas. In complex wetland environments such as south Louisiana, for example, sensor spatial scale is the most important element in identifying separate wetland classes (Ramsey and Laine, 1997). Misclassifications resulting from the use of Landsat data in habitat change analysis, versus high-resolution color infrared photography, can result in overpredictions of emergent vegetation and incorrect estimations of emergent vegetation loss. Additionally, it is difficult to make accurate comparisons between current Landsat data and historical aerial photography data. For these reasons, only aerial photography and derived habitat maps are used in this study.

Classification of Data

The NWI data are based on the National Wetlands Classification Standard (http://www.fws.gov/wetlands/Data/wetlandcodes.html), which was developed by Cowardin and others (1979) for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (hereafter referred to as the “Cowardin system”). This

hierarchical classification system provides uniform terminology and definitions for various wetland and deepwater habitat concepts and categories; those definitions are used in this report.

The Cowardin system is applicable to the entire United States, unlike previous wetland classification systems that worked at only regional levels. The Cowardin system provides an ecological approach to wetland classification, accounting for several levels of differentiation among wetland habitats. Wetlands are initially divided into two basic groups: coastal and inland. Further classifications include water flow, substrate types, (dominant) vegetation types, flooding regimes, salinity levels, pH levels, and human-made modifications. “Emergent wetland” as used in this report includes many habitat variations within the Cowardin system: palustrine and estuarine systems; emergent class; persistent and nonpersistent subclasses; and a variety of water regimes, including temporarily flooded, seasonally flooded, semipermanently flooded, regularly flooded, irregularly flooded, and so on.

To determine current status, the mapping protocol used in this study consisted of aerial photography acquisition, stereoscopic photointerpretation, cartographic transfer, and digitization in accordance with strict mapping standards and conventions. Other important aspects of the protocol included the use of the Cowardin system, groundtruthing, quality control, and peer review. Land, water, and areas where emergent wetlands are present were included on the maps. The information derived from the photography was subsequently transferred by using a zoom transfer scope onto a stable medium overlaying USGS 1:24,000-scale quadrangle base maps (the primary data sources are shown in table 1). In those cases where the data were inadequate or incomplete, contemporary supplemental data were acquired from other sources and used to complete the photographic coverage. For data acquired after 1998, digital orthophotographs were created from true color aerial photography. Images were rectified by using a digital elevation model surface produced by triangulation from an airborne Geographic Positioning System device and inertial measurement unit data. Aerial photographs were observed in the ArcView (Environmental Systems Research Institute [ESRI], Inc.) geographic information system (GIS), and habitat polygons were digitally delineated on a computer screen display. Polygon coverage of emergent wetlands were created in ArcView version 3.2 (ESRI). The groundtruthing phase included the participation of field staff from the NWRC. Draft maps were sent to the agency and staff for review and comments. All comments received were incorporated into the final maps prepared and delivered.

Table 1. Data used in this report.

State	Who Acquired	Emulsion	Date	Scale
Texas	USDA	B&W	1956	1:20,000
	NASA	CIR	1979	1:65,000
	USGS	CIR	1983	1:58,000
	NASA	CIR	1988/89	1:65,000
	NASA	CIR	1992	1:65,000
	USGS	CIR	2006	1:40,000
Louisiana	USDA	B&W	1956	1:20,000
	NASA	CIR	1978	1:65,000
	NASA	CIR	1988	1:65,000
	USGS	CIR	2010	1 meter
Mississippi	USDA	B&W	1950s	1:20,000
	NASA	CIR	1979	1:65,000
	NASA	CIR	1996	1:65,000
	NAIP	NC	2008	1 meter
Alabama	NASA	B&W	1955	1:20,000
	NASA	CIR	1979	1:65,000
	NASA	CIR	1988	1:65,000
	Baldwin County Planning Commission	CIR	2001	1:36,000
	USGS	CIR	2002	1:40,000
Florida	USDA	B&W	1956	1:20,000
	NASA	CIR	1972	1:80,000
	NASA	CIR	1979	1:65,000
	NASA	CIR	1982	1:24,000
	NASA	CIR	1996	1:65,000

Beginning in 2005, the methods for accomplishing land-water delineation and NWI photointerpretation changed with evolving technologies. These technologies have reduced the amount of processing steps required for completion of projects, increasing accuracy, and reducing error. Unlike previous methods, the current technique involves on-screen digitizing and photointerpretation. This process includes developing an initial land-water baseline and concludes with the NWI wetlands and deepwater habitat photointerpretation. The following two paragraphs further explain this process.

Raster

The land-water classification in this study is the initial stage of the photointerpretation process that will result in a baseline corrected dataset. The classification is derived from color infrared digital imagery, which is mosaicked onto USGS 1:24,000 quadrangles. For each quadrangle, a supervised classification (Erdas Imagine Software), using 10 distinct sample signatures, is used to create a classified thematic layer. Several samples are chosen from unique spectral signatures, such as water bodies, forests, open range, crop fields, and marshes. Initial classification results are inspected, and it is determined whether additional sample signatures and processing are required. If desired results are not obtained, the signature file is edited, or more signatures are added to produce a more suitable classification. Once the desired results are obtained, a clump and eliminate process is run to help clean up the topology of noise and remove items below the required minimum mapping unit (0.008 hectares [0.02 acres]). The finished file is recoded to two classes: land or water. The resulting file is then converted to a vector file and imported into an ESRI geodatabase file now ready for manual editing.

Vector

Vector files are manually corrected by using editing tools in ArcGIS. Boundary lines are secured tightly against shoreline. Overhanging tree canopies, bridges, boats, and boat docks are edited and classified as water. In addition to land and water, mud flats, aquatic vegetation, and wrack are also delineated. Ancillary datasets from 1998 through 2010 are used to help classify areas that may be difficult to identify. All areas characterized by emergent vegetation, wetland forest, scrub-shrub, or uplands are classified as land, while open water, aquatics, and mud flats are classified as water. Once complete, a wetland verification check is run to search for adjacency errors, closed polygons, and dangling nodes. After completion, a GIS specialist will perform a quality assurance check of their work. In addition, a second GIS specialist and photointerpreter will perform a final in-house quality control check, assuring accuracy and data integrity.

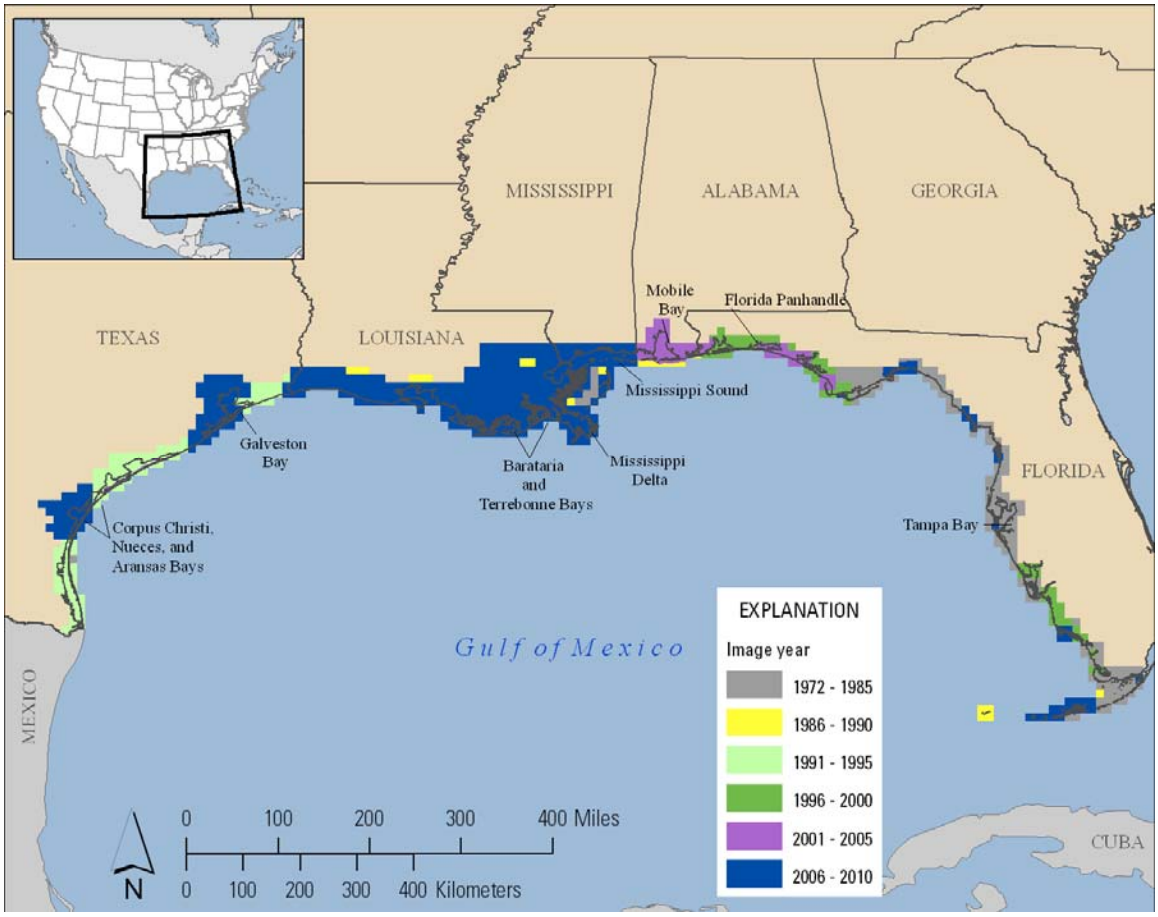
Historical emergent wetland trends were analyzed by comparing changes in total areal coverage of emergent wetland habitat along a time sequence. Comparisons were made among data sums of emergent

wetland coverage for years available. Maps of emergent wetland distribution for these years were studied to determine the location of major changes of coverage.

NWI data for some habitat areas have not been updated recently; the lack of current data for many of these areas is a limitation to understanding how emergent wetland habitats have changed in the past 5–15 years (see Figure 4). This report is limited to the historical data and the most current data available, and it provides detailed analysis on the most recent status and trends data that have been collected. Because emergent habitat coverage on the Gulf Coast has changed significantly and continuously during the past several decades, researchers, land managers, and decisionmakers must use the most current data available until resources allow the opportunity to update datasets. This analysis clarifies the need for further research and data collection in emergent wetland habitats. The years from which data were available for this study include the following:

- Corpus Christi/Nueces Bay: 1950s, 1979, 1992/1993, and 2006
- Galveston Bay: 1950s, 1979, 1983, 1988/1989, 1992/1993, and 2006
- Barataria–Terrebonne Bay: 1950s, 1978, 1988, and 2010
- Mississippi Delta: 1950s, 1978, 1988, and 2010
- Mississippi Sound: 1950s, 1979, 1996, and 2008
- Mobile Bay: 1950s, 1979, 1988, and 2001/2002
- Florida Panhandle: 1979 and 1996
- Tampa Bay: 1950s, 1972, and 1982/1983

Figure 4. Most recent emergent wetlands status data available.



Landsat datasets were not used in this analysis for the reasons previously described, but they do offer different years of data availability (Environmental Protection Agency, 2007). The purpose of the GAP program is to identify habitat "gaps" in nonlisted wildlife species populations across the Nation so that management decisions can ensure that these common species remain abundant. The GAP habitat maps are based on 1992 and 2001 data. The purpose of C-CAP is to provide habitat maps for the Nation's coastal regions and to monitor these areas by updating the habitat maps every 5 years. The C-CAP land cover and change data are based on 1996, 2001, and 2005 data and contain only two classes of emergent wetlands: palustrine and estuarine. The NLCD maps are based on data from 1992 and 2001. Despite the slightly more recent data availability of Landsat data, however, aerial photography and NWI data still provide a more accurate and consistent assessment of wetland habitat coverage. Accuracy assessments were conducted on

portions of the data to compare NLCD with NWI classifications; accuracy ranged between 78–98 percent (Handley and others, 1995; Handley and Wells, 2009).

This report should be used not only to gain an understanding of emergent wetland status and trends in the Gulf of Mexico but also to emphasize the importance of continuously collecting updated data. There are many ongoing threats to emergent wetlands, and wetland habitat coverage can change quickly. Current information is imperative for accurate status and trends assessments.

Description of Area

The Gulf of Mexico coast varies topographically and ecologically throughout its regions. Although all of the habitats analyzed in this report are emergent wetlands, they belong to different ecological regions, or "ecoregions," that are characterized by different landscapes, plant and animal species, uses, and threats to their conservation. Various descriptions of ecoregions exist; the following descriptions are taken from the U.S. Forest Service, USGS, and EPA.

Corpus Christi and Nueces Bay are part of the Southwest Plateau and Plains Dry Steppe and Shrub Province within the Tropical/Subtropical Steppe Division found in the Dry Domain of the United States (http://www.fs.fed.us/land/ecosysmgmt/index.html; Bailey, 1995). The Dry Domain encompasses the southernmost half of the Texas coast, the northern border ending at Aransas Bay, and extends from Texas to parts of California and Canada. Dry climates experience more annual water loss from evaporation than water gain from precipitation. Within the Tropical/Subtropical Steppe Division, the low latitude of Corpus Christi and Nueces Bay places it in a semiarid/subtropical climate. The Southwest Plateau and Plains Dry Steppe and Shrub Province contains rolling plains, plateaus, and occasional canyons in certain areas. The climate is hot for a large part of the year with a short, mild winter and few frosts (average annual temperatures: 16° to 21°C [60° to 70°F]). Evaporation is nearly twice as great as precipitation for nearly half of the year. Vegetation consists primarily of grasses and mesquite, with small amounts of trees and shrubs.

Galveston Bay is located on the border of the Prairie Parkland (Subtropical) Province in the Prairie Division and the Southeastern Mixed Forest Province in the Subtropical Division, both found in the Humid Temperate Domain (http://www.fs.fed.us/land/ecosysmgmt/index.html; Bailey, 1995). Both provinces have gentle slopes and many bodies of water, albeit many of which are sluggish. Summers are hot, and winters are short and mild (average annual temperatures: 15° to 21°C [60° to 70°F]). Precipitation is greater than evaporation. Forests of hardwood and pines compose the vegetation, with *Spartina* marsh grass dominating the coastal salt marshes.

The rest of the Gulf Coast lies within the Subtropical Division and Humid Temperate Domain (with the exception of the southernmost tip of Florida, the tropical Everglades Province, which is found in the Savanna Division and Humid Tropical Domain and consists primarily of swamps and marshes with

cypress forests, mangroves, tropical hardwoods, grasses, and other aquatic plants; http://www.fs.fed.us/land/ecosysmgmt/index.html; Bailey, 1995). The Subtropical Division has a warm, humid climate with frequent rain, particularly in the summer. Forests abound, usually pines on the coast and hardwoods farther inland. The Outer Coastal Plain Mixed Forest Province covers the Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and (most of the) Florida coasts. Gentle slopes and many bodies of water also characterize this landscape. The climate is mild (average annual temperatures: 16° to 21°C [60° to 70°F]) with significant precipitation. The vegetation consists of temperate rainforest, including evergreen oaks, laurels, magnolias, tree ferns, small palms, shrubs, herbaceous plants, lianas, and epiphytes.

The Western Gulf Coastal Plain comprises the coast of Texas and the western half of Louisiana's coast (http://www.epa.gov/wed/pages/ecoregions/tx_eco.htm; Griffith and others, 2004). Corpus Christi, Nueces Bay, Aransas Bay, and Galveston Bay are included in this ecoregion. It is distinguished by flat topography, plains, and grasslands and contains many barrier islands, bays, peninsulas, marshes, lagoons, and estuaries. Approximately 500 species of migratory and residential birds can be found in the Western Gulf Coastal Plain. A great deal of change has occurred in this ecoregion. Approximately 35 percent of the population of Texas lives within 160.9 km (100 miles) of the coastline in this region, which also houses a large portion of the State's industry and commerce (Griffith and others, 2004). More than half of the Nation's chemical and petroleum production occurs off the coasts of Texas and Louisiana. Consequently, oil and gas production, along with increased urbanization, industrialization, and habitat fragmentation, is a significant threat to this ecoregion.

The Mississippi Alluvial Plain encompasses the eastern half of Louisiana's coast, including Barataria–Terrebonne Bay and the Mississippi Delta (http://www.epa.gov/wed/pages/ecoregions/la_eco.htm; Daigle and others, 2006). This ecoregion extends from the eastern Louisiana gulf coast northward to the southern tip of Illinois. It is wide and flat with river terraces, levees, and swales defining the landscape. This ecoregion has the fine-textured and poorly drained soil that is characteristic of alluvial plains. It once consisted primarily of bottomland hardwood forests but, with the development of levee systems to reduce flooding, has since been cleared for agriculture, cultivation, and development. This ecoregion contains one of the largest wetland systems in the country, although vast losses of habitat and fragmentation have significantly altered the landscape. It is a major bird

migration corridor, although wildlife populations have been detrimentally affected by loss of forest and wetland habitat and heavy pesticide input. Other threats to this ecoregion include subsidence, erosion, lack of sediment input, and sea level rise. Wetlands provide a barrier against hurricanes and other storm events for concentrated human populations along the receding coastline of this ecoregion.

The Southern Coastal Plain extends from the Mississippi coast across Alabama, the Florida Panhandle, and along the gulf coast of Florida before reaching the Southern Florida Coastal Plain (http://www.epa.gov/wed/pages/ecoregions/fl_eco.htm; Griffith and others, 1994; National Ocean Service, 2008). It includes the Mississippi Sound in Mississippi, Mobile Bay in Alabama, and the Florida Panhandle and Tampa Bay in Florida. There are many lakes, estuaries, lagoons, forested wetlands, and barrier islands in this flat ecoregion. Land development and urbanization are the main threats to the Southern Coastal Plain, along with agricultural land conversion and toxic runoff from crop cultivation and urban development. Land development in the Southern Coastal Plain, particularly along the Florida coast, is heavy.

The various ecoregions of the Gulf of Mexico coast share certain defining characteristics. They all contain emergent wetlands that are part of the vast Gulf of Mexico ecosystem, and these wetlands have all experienced change over time because of land development and other threats to their ecological integrity. Chapters to come will give more detail on the background, historical changes, threats, and current status and trends for each of these wetland habitats.

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Appendix A: Gulf of Mexico Emergent Wetlands Literature Search

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