

REPORT: 15 NATIONAL PARKS, OTHER NATURAL AREAS MOST AT RISK FROM BP OIL BLOWOUT IDENTIFIED

Sites in AL, FL, LA, MS and TX Highlighted - "Special Places" in Grave Jeopardy Today; Potential Impacts Underscore the Steep Cost of America's Addiction to Oil.

WASHINGTON, D.C.//May 26, 2010//From Padre Island National Seashore in Texas to the Everglades National Park in Florida, the 15 national parks, wildlife refuges and state parks in Gulf states most threatened by the ongoing BP oil blowout are identified in a new report from the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and the Rocky Mountain Climate Organization (RMCO).

The new NRDC/RMCO report, "Special Places at Risk in the Gulf: Effects of the BP Oil Catastrophe," lists the following 15 top national and state parks and wildlife areas at risk to contamination because of the BP oil blowout:

1. Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, Texas
2. Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge, Alabama
3. Breton National Wildlife Refuge, Louisiana
4. Delta National Wildlife Refuge, Louisiana
5. Dry Tortugas National Park, Florida
6. Everglades National Park, Florida
7. Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge, Florida
8. Grand Bay National Wildlife Refuge, Mississippi and Alabama
9. Gulf Islands National Seashore, Mississippi and Florida
10. John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, Florida
11. Key West National Wildlife Refuge, Florida
12. Padre Island National Seashore, Texas
13. Pass a Loutre Wildlife Management Area, Louisiana
14. Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge, Louisiana
15. St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, Florida

Theo Spencer, senior advocate, Climate Center, Natural Resources Defense Council, said: **"This could become America's greatest environmental disaster. Oil contamination from the explosion of BP's drilling rig threatens precious natural resources and livelihoods across the Gulf of Mexico and beyond. By highlighting special places that belong to all Americans, this report sheds light on one stark aspect of the BP disaster: our country's dangerous over-dependence on fossil fuels. That dependence threatens part of America's "Best Idea", some National Parks and other protected places with unique natural resources in a region of great natural value."**

Stephen Saunders, president, Rocky Mountain Climate Organization, said: **"The 15 special places highlighted in our report were chosen to include the best examples of the full range of both the protected public areas and the resources within them that are vulnerable to contamination by the BP disaster. Because the potential reach of this catastrophe is so broad, our list certainly cannot include more than a tiny fraction of what is at stake as oil continues to gush into and spread around the Gulf."**

Julie Wraithmell, wildlife policy coordinator, Florida Audubon, said: **"For Gulf Coast states, our coastal areas are our lifeblood, ecologically and economically. Blindingly white sand beaches where marine turtles and diminutive snowy plovers nest; vast seagrass meadows flush with redfish and trout; mangrove islands blanketed with nesting pelicans; vibrant coral reefs and cool, clear coastal springs; oyster bars and vast marshes, nurseries for the seafood that feeds a nation. These habitats were already under tremendous pressure when the Deepwater Horizon accident brought oil to our shores. It is our job now to do all we can to protect and restore our coastal wealth, and find a way forward with renewable energy policies so that as Americans we can all tell our children, "Never again," and know we can keep our promise."**

Enid Sisskin, PhD, University of West Florida and board member of several local and regional environmental organizations, including the Gulf Coast Environmental Defense, the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy, and the Florida Conservation Alliance, said: **“For years, the fear of the environmental catastrophe such as we are now seeing, has united Floridians in opposition to drilling near our coasts. Now we all realize that there is no place far enough away that we can be certain that the pollution and other environmentally damaging effects of drilling will spare our shores. This disaster will affect our environment and economy for many years to come.”**

Captain Louis Skrmetta, of Gulfport, Mississippi, a third generation ferry pilot and CEO of Ship Island Excursions, the official passenger ferry service for the National Park Service and Gulf Islands National Seashore in Mississippi, said, **“Gulf Islands National Seashore is the Yosemite, Canyonlands, and Grand Teton of the Central Gulf Coast region. These resilient white sand islands have experienced more than a hundred major hurricanes, and each time the eco-system endured. The BP catastrophe is occurring approximately 40 miles south of the Mississippi islands, and for the first time our national seashore and its magnificent natural recourses are truly endangered and could be transformed into a "dead zone". We need a miracle.”**

For the full report, go to www.rockymountainclimate.org on the Web.

METHODOLOGY

The list of 15 sites included in **“Special Places at Risk in the Gulf: Effects of the BP Oil Catastrophe”** was chosen to include the best examples of the full range of both the protected coastal public areas and the resources within them that are vulnerable to contamination by the BP disaster. Because the potential reach of this catastrophe is so broad, our list certainly cannot include more than a tiny fraction of what is at stake as oil continues to gush into and spread around the Gulf. But by highlighting some of these special places and what they protect, this report may shed some light on the amazing environment of the Gulf of Mexico that now threatened by the BP oil disaster.

This list does not reflect any judgment or opinion on where the oil from the BP oil blowout may go and which areas may be most affected. Instead, the list reflects the judgment of government agencies and scientists that the oil may go anywhere in the Gulf (and potentially even beyond the Gulf, a possibility which we have not addressed in this report.) For example, the National Park Service has identified eight units of the national park system that are potentially vulnerable to the oil. Those eight units encircle the entire Gulf, and include Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve, in and around New Orleans, Louisiana; Gulf Islands National Seashore, with units in both Mississippi and northwestern Florida; De Soto National Memorial, on the Manatee River at Bradenton, Florida; Big Cypress National Preserve and Everglades, Biscayne, and Dry Tortugas national parks, all in south Florida; and Padre Island National Seashore, on the coast of south Texas.

As this is being written, it still is not clear how much oil has already escaped from the BP blowout, when the gush of oil will be stopped, where the Gulf's currents and winds will take the oil, and what may happen if one or more hurricanes enters the Gulf this year.

ABOUT THE GROUPS

The Natural Resources Defense Council (<http://www.nrdc.org>) is a national non-profit organization dedicated to protecting public health and the environment, with more than 1.2 million members and online activists.

The Rocky Mountain Climate Organization (<http://www.rockymountainclimate.org>) is a Colorado-based coalition that works to reduce climate disruption and its effects.

CONTACT: Patrick Mitchell, (703) 276-3266 or pmitchell@hastingsgroup.com.

EDITOR'S NOTE: A streaming audio replay of the news event will be available on the Web at www.nrdc.org as of 5 p.m. EDT/4 p.m. CDT on May 26, 2010.