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Tampa Bay Estuary Program & Restore America's Estuaries to Receive Third Place Gulf Guardian Award

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ATLANTA – Today the Gulf of Mexico Program announced that Tampa Bay Estuary Program & Restore America's Estuaries will receive a Third Place 2015 Gulf Guardian Award in the Partnerships Category. The award will be given tonight at an awards ceremony at the Texas State Aquarium in Corpus Christi, Texas.

Diane Altsman, Chief of Staff of the Gulf of Mexico Program said, "This is the 13th year of the Gulf Guardian Awards Program, and I am proud to say that each year the winners in all categories have represented the very best of environmental accomplishments in the Gulf of Mexico. The Gulf of Mexico Program partnership works to improve the environmental health of the Gulf, and the Gulf Guardian Awards is an important way for us to recognize these valuable efforts."

In 2012, the Tampa Bay Environmental Restoration Fund (TBERF) was initiated by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation with the goal providing funding through a competitive application process for projects that will protect, restore or enhance the natural resources of Tampa Bay and its contributing watershed. The Tampa Bay Estuary Program and the national non-profit organization Restore America's Estuaries encourage contributors from both public and private sectors to participate. Funding for TBERF has been provided by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Southwest Florida Water Management District, The Mosaic Company Foundation, Manatee County, Hillsborough County, Pinellas County, the Florida Department of Transportation, TECO Energy and the Tampa Port Authority to date. Each proposal is required to have a dollar-for-dollar match, further leveraging the impact of the grant funds.

In addition to the awarded projects benefiting Tampa Bay, they also provide substantial benefit to the Gulf of Mexico. The restoration objectives for TBERF are virtually identical to those of Gulf of Mexico coastal areas. In particular, restoration of coastal habitats, oyster reefs and tidal tributaries improve the quality of Gulf fisheries nursery areas and reduction of pollutants in runoff improve water quality and support seagrass recovery critical to both resident and Gulfwide wildlife stocks.

In 2013 and 2014, TBERF awarded \$1.5M of funding of a total of 18 projects for such activities as providing 1,500 acres of coastal habitat restoration, treating urban runoff from 500+ acres, and protecting colonial waterbird islands. In 2014, nearly \$625,000 was awarded for projects resulting in such activities as in the restoration of not only 8,500 feet of oyster reefs, but also 26 acres of coastal wetland habitat and almost 200

acres of freshwater marsh habitat. In May 2015, TBERF will leverage public funds with private sector contributions to provide increased resources for restoring and protecting the natural systems of Tampa Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. As a result, TBERF is being recognized for awarding projects that meet both the restoration goals for Tampa Bay and the Gulf of Mexico, having projects with measurable environmental benefits and creating a transferable model for other regions.

The Gulf of Mexico Program initiated the Gulf Guardian awards in 2000 as a way to recognize and honor the businesses, community groups, individuals, and agencies that are taking positive steps to keep the Gulf healthy, beautiful and productive. First, second and third place awards are given in seven categories: individual, business/industry, youth environmental education, civic/nonprofit organizations, cultural diversity/environmental justice, partnership and bi-national efforts.

The Gulf of Mexico Program began in 1988 to protect, restore, and maintain the health and productivity of the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem in economically sustainable ways. The Gulf of Mexico Program is underwritten by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and is a non-regulatory, inclusive consortium of state and federal government agencies and representatives of the business and agricultural community, fishing industry, scientists, environmentalists, and community leaders from all five Gulf States. The Gulf Program seeks to improve the environmental health of the Gulf in concert with economic development.

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