

Quarterly Report for Matagorda Bay Mitigation Trust November 30, 2021

Project:

Colorado River Delta Ecosystem Assessment: Gathering Key Baseline Data to Guide Future Habitat Restoration in Matagorda Bay

Organizations:

¹Center for Sportfish Science and Conservation (CSSC) at Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies Texas A&M University at Corpus Christi

²BIOWEST, INC.

Investigators:

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Contract No.: 0015

Project Term: 03/01/2021 – 07/31/2023

Reporting Period: 3/1/2021 – 11/30/2021

The contracted project with the Matagorda Bay Mitigation Trust was initiated as of March 1, 2021. After this date, we identified and got approval for a subcontractor with expertise in areas not covered by researchers at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. Areas for subcontract expertise include Benthic Habitat Characterization, and a portion of the Hydrological and Ecological Assessment work. The chosen contractor was BIOWEST, Inc. and a subaward was issued to this group in April 2021 (with a start date of March 1) in the amount of \$230,000.

Task 1 - Benthic Habitat Mapping: Perform a detailed benthic habitat characterization of the Colorado River Delta study area to provide an updated habitat baseline.

Status: Ongoing

Spring '21

- BIO-WEST conducted project management, internal project team meetings, task coordination, and invoicing.
- BIO-WEST conducted a site reconnaissance with CSSC scientist on May 25th, 2021.
- BIO-WEST initiated map preparation and conducted site selection analysis to facilitate ecological sampling.

Summer '21

- BIO-WEST initiated benthic habitat mapping during this quarter, this included
 - 1) an evaluation of existing aerial imagery for the Colorado River Delta project area and
 - 2) field surveys using side-scan sonar to map benthic habitats including oyster reefs, submerged aquatic vegetation and open bay bottom. Benthic habitat field mapping activities will continue to be conducted as the project progresses.

Fall '21

- BIO-WEST continued benthic habitat mapping in the Colorado River Delta during this quarter when tidal conditions were appropriate. Field surveys involved side-scan sonar to map benthic habitats including oyster reefs, submerged aquatic vegetation and open bay bottom. Benthic habitat mapping will continue this winter and into the spring as tidal conditions are appropriate.

Task 2 – Ecological Assessment: Conduct a comprehensive ecological assessment linking the distribution of species and their habitats spatially within the Colorado River Delta study area.

Status: Ongoing

Spring '21

- BIO-WEST conducted the Spring 2021 coastal bird surveys for the six established study sites in the delta on May 26-27, 2021.
- BIO-WEST initiated analysis of species and habitat data collected during Spring 2021 coastal bird surveys.
- CSSC performed first of two sampling events for Spring on June 2nd, 2021. Three epibenthic sled samples were taken at six sampling sites. In addition, water quality was taken at two additional sites, see map.
- CSSC performed the second Spring sampling event on June 11th, 2021. Three epibenthic sled samples were taken at six sampling sites along with water quality at sentinel sites. At present, CSSC has 36 samples in house representing Spring samples.

Summer '21

- BIO-WEST continued data reduction and analysis for the Avian Survey conducted in Spring '21.
 - Examined acoustic recordings from six sites for the presence of Eastern Black Rails (*Laterallus jamaicensis*), and Whooping Cranes (*Grus americana*).
- CSSC conducted two summer sampling events on August 27th and September 8th. This included the usual three epibenthic tows at each site except for site 6 which we were unable to reach due to very low water levels typical of the summer months.
- CSSC also deployed three HOBOWare data loggers designed to monitor Temperature and Water Levels at three locations (see map).

Fall '21

- BIO-WEST conducted Fall avian point count surveys from October 13-15, 2021, with a team of two biologists covering all six study sites established within the Colorado River Delta. Timed point count surveys (8 points per site) were conducted for each site, with two sites completed per day. In addition to other relevant climate parameters, salinity (ppt) was recorded at the time of each survey. Additionally, acoustic recorders were deployed and set to record continuously at each of the six sample sites. Recorders were set prior to the

onset of avian point counts and retrieved at the conclusion of the full survey effort.

- BIO-WEST initiated data reduction and analysis for the Avian point count surveys conducted in October. Acoustic analysis for fall sampling was also initiated by reviewing recordings for evidence of calling Eastern Black Rails (*Laterallus jamaicensis jamaicensis* and Whooping Crane (*Grus americana*).
- CSSC conducted the first Fall sampling event on November 1st. This included three epibenthic tows at sites 1-5. Site 6 was still too shallow to sample due to low tides. Water level data loggers were downloaded from sites 1,2, and 5. Our air pressure data logger from site 1 was stolen. Salinity loggers were deployed at sites 2 and 5. PVC mounting poles for data loggers were revamped with a slip-on design.
- CSSC conducted the second Fall sampling event November 8th. The same five sites were sampled for a total of 15 samples. Water levels at data loggers were measure at sites 1, 2, and 5.

Task 3 – Hydrological Assessment: Complete a hydrological assessment to better understand water availability, flow paths, and topography in the Colorado Delta.

Status: Not yet begun

Spring '21

- Nothing to report for this quarter.

Summer '21

- Nothing to report for this quarter.

Fall '21

- BIO-WEST initiated the hydrological assessment via data compilation and review of existing imagery and topography of the Colorado River delta study area. BIO-WEST also initiated an examination of flow paths within the Colorado River delta region.

Task 4 – Data Analysis, Compilation and Reporting: Collective data analysis, interim/quarterly reporting, input solicitation, and final reporting.

Status: Ongoing

Spring '21

- 06/30/2021 - Quarterly report No. 1 completed for project.

Summer '21

- 09/30/2021 - Quarterly report No. 2 completed for project.
- CSSC has 66 marsh edge epibenthic samples in house.

Fall '21

- 12/14/2021 - Quarterly report No. 2 was submitted for this project.
- CSSC has 96 marsh edge epibenthic samples in house.

