"Quieting The Gulf"
Phase 2 Project Description (2026-2027)

Background

In 2025, the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), with funding from NOAA Fisheries and in partnership with Marine Minerals Administration (MMA, formerly BOEM), launched a project called "Quieting the Gulf," an effort to increase the voluntary uptake of seismic source technologies and survey methods in the Gulf to ultimately reduce the acoustic footprint (relative to marine mammal hearing) compared to conventional compressed air seismic sources (i.e., airguns) while still supporting effective oil and gas exploration.[1]

A group of industry and agency partners met in Washington, D.C., in September 2025 to launch Phase 1 of this project (refer to the 2025 workshop summary). Since then, a small group of NFWF and NOAA staff and industry representatives have been serving as a steering committee as we enter the next phase of this effort – implementing recommendations from the September 2025 workshop.

Phase 2-Specific Goals

Phase 2 is centered on developing and building awareness of and interest in a *voluntary*, industry-informed approach to "Quieting the Gulf" that is technologically robust, environmentally meaningful, responsive to the oil and gas industry's need for high-quality seismic data, and incentivizes voluntary uptake by industry. Key components include:

- Build on existing relationships developed through the 2025 "Quieting the Gulf" workshop, while broadening connections to other industry participants and other stakeholders interested in the topic.
- Develop the 2025 workshop's two primary recommendations into a unified approach to foster greater industry uptake of quieter oil and gas exploration techniques:
    - **Develop and vet an index system** to score and enable comparison between the sound emission footprint of different seismic sources and methods relative to marine mammals in the Gulf
    - **Design and develop** a standardized acoustic measurement system **and testing protocol to support consistent measurement and comparison** of different seismic sources and operational configurations.
- Foster industry acceptance through ongoing outreach to broaden industry awareness; seek input into and support for moving forward with testing and eventual voluntary uptake of "quieter" seismic sources as part of a subsequent phase of work.

The ultimate goal is for industry to be sufficiently interested and invested in the approach to take the lead in putting in place and managing a system for grading different seismic sources on an ongoing basis (similar to the Environmental Ship Index or ENERGY STAR rating system).

Approach

Our approach is grounded in both focused work teams (to shape practical, industry-driven strategies) and broader outreach (to foster wider awareness and acceptance). Key aspects of the approach are outlined below.

[1] This effort is being funded by the Deepwater Horizon settlement to support restoration of marine mammals.

1. Industry-led work teams

We are convening two different work teams: one focused on building out an index system to assess different seismic sources and methods sound emission footprint relative to marine mammals in the Gulf, and a second focused on designing and developing a standardized testing protocol to foster comparison across different seismic systems.

Each team will have an industry lead – David Hedgeland (former bp) for the index system; Darren Ireland (LGL) and Zach Lawrence (ExxonMobil) for the testing protocols and design – and have 8-10 members covering a range of disciplines and expertise. Work Teams are expected to meet (primarily online) between September 2026 and June 2027 and will generate recommendations for further discussion with a wider set of industry players.

2. Outreach efforts.

While Work Team composition is limited in number to foster effective discussions and drafting, the project recognizes the critical importance of broader industry awareness and input. To that end, the project envisions several strategies for bringing the wider array of interested industry players into the mix:

- **Individual outreach.** To the extent that there are individuals with needed expertise who are unable to serve on the work teams or have limited time, we will create more opportunities for those people to contribute (on an ad hoc basis) in Work Team discussions, as well as review and provide feedback on evolving materials.
- **Periodic webinars.** NFWF, in collaboration with the Work Team co-leads, will convene periodic webinars to keep the wider set of industry members aware of project progress. We anticipate having three to four of these briefings over the course of the project.
- **Presentations at industry gatherings.** Co-leads anticipate presenting information on Work Team efforts at the most pertinent industry meetings – both to keep people apprised, elicit input and gauge the degree of industry interest and support for the ideas under discussion.

This effort will also be informed by periodic discussions with regulators to ensure Work Team members have a strong understanding of the types of systems and protocols that feel viable and useful to the government; the exact look and feel of that involvement is to be determined.

Timeline, Governance and Work Product

This effort is expected to run through fall 2027, with a target of sharing Work Team recommendations at the August ’27 IMAGE conference and a final write-up on the Work Team products available to interested parties in fall 2027.

NFWF sees its role as supporting industry discussions and fostering ongoing conversations with NOAA Fisheries, MMA and other government players as industry considers strategies for quieting the Gulf. As this is intended to be an industry-driven, voluntary effort, we do not anticipate any formal government adoption of the ideas generated through these discussions. Rather, we hope and anticipate that industry interest in the work products developed through this dialogue will be adopted by those working in the oil and gas exploration sector in the Gulf via industry standards.

Want to Stay Informed?

We invite anyone interested in keeping apprised of this effort to reach out to Michelle Pico at Pico@nfwf.org. Please provide your contact information (via Google Form: https://forms.gle/PnCAtcwrXqFfpbZK7) so we can keep you informed about upcoming workshops and meetings.