

Louisiana and America's Wetland: Crisis, Opportunity and Choice

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There are times in our lives and the life of our nation when we are transformed. There are times when the ways we think, act and set our priorities are challenged to change to deal with real crisis or opportunity. And there are times when what we do—or fail to do—will determine how we will be remembered and judged by history. In short, there are times when things are just different from what went before. This is one of those times.

As we watch the images of shattered homes and communities of coastal Louisiana and hear the stories of displacement and loss left in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita it is impossible to not be moved. And the response has been overwhelming. The generosity and compassion of the American people has given comfort, aid and hope. But truth be told, this is not a problem that can be solved just by sheltering the displaced, clearing the rubble and restoring power and water. It will take more than open hearts and open wallets to revitalize this most distinctive of American treasures. This is not just hurricane relief. This is about confronting the factors and policies that turned storms into catastrophes. It will take vision and leadership.

Make no mistake, these were bad storms but we shouldn't let that obscure the simple fact that their impacts were made far worse by decisions and actions made over a succession of generations that resulted in a Louisiana and a New Orleans that were far more vulnerable than they had to be. Nothing makes this point clearer than the failure of the flood walls in New Orleans and the stunning loss of over 1.5 million acres of coastal wetlands and barrier shorelines largely due to the manner in which we as a nation decided to manage our rivers, transport our products, and produce and transport oil and gas. Sure there several efforts underway to assign blame for these things, and that will have to play out, but those efforts so far have missed the fundamental point. We need to understand

why we were so vulnerable not just so we can hold someone responsible but so we can take responsibility for what needs to be done to secure a safer, more vital and sustainable future.

Because this time it's different. In the past when we talked about the need to restore the Mississippi River delta and coastal plain it was dismissed as too speculative, too costly, too environmental, too parochial, too much of this or too little of that. When we talked about the fact that a collapsing coast was endangering communities like New Orleans the reaction was generally one of disbelief. Coming to terms with this crisis was just never the priority. Well now it has to be.

As this nation contemplates what to do next every interest group in America seems to be lining up to ride the Katrina/Rita recovery train. Just how broad that recovery package should be is anybody's guess but where it should begin is clear. It has to start with a commitment to restore the wetlands, estuaries and barrier shorelines of the Mississippi River delta and coastal plain and a commitment to provide real storm protection to the population centers of the region. Protection that can only come from the integration of levees, coastal conservation and restoration, and effective land use planning and building codes.

If we don't get those things right we are kidding ourselves about the rest. No amount of subsidy for redevelopment will inspire confidence in the recovery of New Orleans if we do not provide assurances that the coast will not continue to disappear at the rate of nearly 25 square miles each year and that the levees and pumps at the heart of our hurricane defenses will not fail again. Various ideas are starting to surface and predictably the reactions tend to focus on just how much, or how little, is being offered and on which private interests would benefit. All of this skepticism has its place but too often it seems to mask a fundamental discomfort with doing anything at all. Indeed, all of the talk of dollars and turf betrays a disturbing lack of vision or purpose as to what needs to be done and what value America wants to get for its investment. If the recovery of coastal Louisiana is driven just by a project list or a budget figure we will lose this opportunity and sow the seeds of future disaster. An expenditure without a purpose is a gamble, not an investment and we

ought not to gamble on the future of the communities of south Louisiana or on the future of the greatest wetland and estuarine treasure in our country. We have to get it right this time.

But getting it right is not just about science and engineering. There is an abundance of high quality science and engineering expertise to inform the coast restoration effort but that expertise will never take the place of leadership and vision. If we are not clear about how safe we want to be and how many functions and values we want to be served by our natural landscape (think fish and wildlife habitat, local tax base, storm buffers for pipelines and navigation, water purification etc...) then we can't expect scientists and engineers to come up with plans that work.

So above all else the recovery plans for Louisiana must be guided by a vision of communities that are protected from the surge associated with a major storm, a vision of a coast in which land elevations are maintained or increased and where the natural functions and estuarine rhythms of the region are restored and maintained to the greatest degree practicable. This vision must govern not only flood protection and coastal restoration work but inform all other activities in the region including navigation, oil and gas activity, agriculture and development. This is not because those other things are not important. They are. *But it should now be clear to everyone that if we don't stem the collapse of this coast and don't make the developed areas more secure the future for the rest of those activities is bleak as well.* This is not just about competing philosophies; it is about very stark realities that need to give rise to a very clear sense of purpose and priority.

That is not how things got done in the past and we are all living with the terrible consequences. This time it's different. It has to be.

The Challenge.

Prior to Katrina, the prospects for advancing the coastal restoration agenda, hurricane protection and other water resource projects were confined to the Water Resource Development Act. The restoration package had been scaled back to a \$1.9 billion near term

effort that focused almost exclusively on the eastern side of the state, leaving much of the coast—recently ravaged by Rita—until later for consideration. The WRDA bill was largely a list of projects from Louisiana and across the nation. In short, every project was in competition with every other project with no real regard for any overarching national policy or public works agenda.

The two storms have starkly exposed the lack of any meaningful national water resources agenda. We are now paying the price for it. It has also made clear the need to move immediately to address critical coastal restoration and hurricane protection measures apart from the WRDA process, a process that has failed to authorize anything in five years and that guarantees not one penny in funding.

It is vital that this nation now identify and prioritize its true water resource needs and that Louisiana's hurricane protection and coastal restoration and conservation needs be the cornerstones of that agenda. It is also vital that Louisiana identify and prioritize its true water resources needs around the same principles. To do less will only sow the seeds of future tragedy and undermine the confidence of our citizens, businesses and friends across the nation to believe and invest in the future of our state. That is not acceptable.

This will not be easy. Making hard decisions about priorities and convincing a sceptical public and Congress to invest in our state and to expand the role of the Corps of Engineers and other agencies will not be simple. Legitimate concerns often mask cynicism or a more fundamental lack of concern about our plight. We must be focused on addressing the former and exposing the latter for what it is. And we must act in every instance to build trust and confidence that we are in fact building a Louisiana that is ecologically and physically secure and sustainable.

The Opportunity

We have a unique opportunity to forge a path to a more secure and sustainable Louisiana, but this opportunity will be short lived. We must identify those actions and

projects that are both vital to the region's cultural and ecological integrity and by extension to its economic vitality. The immediate emphasis must be on those actions because without secure communities and a sustainable environment there is no prospect for a robust economy.

To make the most of this opportunity we urge the focus of action at the federal be one the following points:

- 1) **Frame a Vision.** We don't think that typical legislative authorizing language will capture the importance of moving with great purpose and urgency or provide the guidance to whatever agency or commission is ultimately charged with implementing the pieces of the restoration/revitalization/ coastal protection program. There needs to be a clear expression of Congressional intent that this is important and urgent business. Suggested language could include the following:

The catastrophic losses caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita combined with our knowledge of the ongoing collapse of the landmass of coastal Louisiana make clear the relationships between hurricane protection and the conservation and restoration of the wetlands and barrier shorelines of coastal Louisiana. It is further clear that both the level and quality of hurricane protection structures and the extent and vitality of Louisiana's coastal environment must be enhanced if population centers, valuable fish and wildlife habitat, and vital energy and transportation infrastructure are to be safeguarded. It is in the public interest of the people of the United States that the population centers of the region have effective protection from hurricane storm surges up to those associated with a category 5 storm to the extent practicable and that the wetlands, barrier shorelines and estuaries of the region be managed to enhance their natural estuarine and coastal functions and to work in a

complimentary fashion with structural flood protections to reduce the risk of catastrophic flooding from hurricane surges.

- 2) **Commit to the LCA.** The Coast 2050 plan mapped out a program that cost \$14 billion dollars to implement over time. This program is more essential than ever and the price tag now seems incredibly inexpensive compared to the costs of doing too little or waiting too long. A major focus should be to encourage land elevation, and maintain and enhance these wetlands and marshes. In the past there has been an emphasis on salinity regimes and wetland acreage without much regard to the implications for the overall elevation our coast. (For example, wetlands in impounded areas may actually lose elevation if they are under pump and, while they may have many values, do not serve the same storm buffer role as do marsh/swamp areas that are above sea level. This is particularly true in the delta. *We believe that the main thrust of coastal restoration in the delta should be on maintaining and increasing marsh elevations.* This will require a greater emphasis on sediment management and the use of riverine inputs to facilitate the maintenance and creation of organic soils. This is what the LCA, at least the near term piece is really all about. We need to be clear about that so there will be a context for understanding why the LCA, particularly as it was originally conceived in the October 2003 draft, is worthy of authorization and funding. The approach to authorizing the LCA should not be confined to the traditional processes that have held sway in the past. The WRDA process has proven itself to be too unreliable, too political, and too limited in its scope to do what must be done. Alternatives must be considered that allow urgently needed authorizations to be obtained without sacrificing fundamental accountability measures. One option that should be expressly considered is a more robust use of the CWPPRA authority, which as originally conceived could serve as the authorizing vehicle for much if not all of the LCA plan.
- 3) **Apply OCS Funds to Restoring the Coast and Protecting Communities.**

- a. Make it clear that OCS funds allocated under the Energy Bill can be used

as local cost share on State/Federal projects. There is still uncertainty about whether the funds recently provided by the Energy Bill can actually be used to cost share projects with the Federal Government. We should remove this uncertainty by affirming the Administration view that the funds be usable to leverage other federal dollars on qualified projects.

- b. Provide planning assistance funds. Local governments face a Catch-22 dilemma when it comes to participating in efforts to plan for the recovery of their communities and the future of the coast. On the one hand, broader assistance is held in abeyance until the locals can demonstrate their plans for using new funds while on the other hand there is a scarcity of planning funding and personnel in some communities to prepare plans that truly meet the challenges of today. For example, before local governments can receive a share of the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) funds provided by the 2005 Energy Bill they must prepare and submit a plan to the state and the Department of Interior. Presently, the ability of some of our coastal parishes to prepare such plans may be compromised. Planning assistance funds could be provided via the Barataria Terrebonne National Estuary Program and the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation to ensure that adequate plans are in fact prepared for those parishes.

- 4) **Commit to “Category 5” protection for our major population centers.** If one thing is certain, it is clear that we cannot evacuate all sectors of our communities and that our current reliance of structures designed a generation ago have failed us. We support a renewed commitment to strong systems of levee’s and other structures that together with a robust coastal conservation and restoration effort gives real and lasting protection to the people of south Louisiana. For population centers such as New Orleans this protection should be scaled to afford protection from the storm surge of a category 5 storm. In the context of immediate action we believe enhancement of the metro New Orleans system and the Morganza to the Gulf project should be authorized, funded, and expedited.

5) **Plan for the future we expect, not the past and use the best available science and engineering.** While planning for the future of our coast and its communities must be rooted in a vision as stated above, those plans and projects need to be developed using the best science and engineering practices to achieve the envisioned outcome. Simply put, good science and engineering will not substitute for a vision, but a vision without good science and engineering to steer its implantation is little more than a dream. Additionally our plans must now also be rooted in likelihood that we will continue to experience rising seas and, at least for the foreseeable, more frequent and intense storms. Such factors should not only influence the design of levees and structures but the development of land use plans, building codes, and emergency response plans.

6) **Commit to good planning and conservation.** One lesson is already clear: Many of the storms impacts could have been lessened had better conservation and planning been used to guide development over the past 50 years. The areas most prone to flooding were more at risk in part as a result of development practices and engineering decisions that frequently predated many of the laws and programs that have helped reduce wetland loss and set the stage for coastal restoration. We believe is vital to maintain those programs in this time of crisis and planning for the future. While those programs may need to be applied with special sensitivity it is critical to note that we did not get into this situation by being too focused on conservation or too inclusive in our decision making.

1. "Close" the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet. The MRGO is a controversial part of our past and now is the time to make sure it is not a part of our future. The decision to “close” the MRGO must be made now in and a plan for what a “closed” channel might entail must be mandated to address the environmental, community protection and navigation needs of the area.

2. Maximize the use of existing projects, structures and authorities. It is ironic that at the very time that the need for a more robust coastal restoration effort has become so clear that there are existing projects such as siphons and river reintroduction and

diversion projects (e.g. Davis Pond, Caenarvon and Bonnet Carre') that are unused or under utilized from the stand point of rehabilitating our coastal resources. The reasons for this are many including narrow operating targets and fear of constituent backlash. **Whatever the reasons, all existing water control structures and conveyance features must be looked at anew with the intention of maximizing the overall recovery and restoration of our coast.** If we cannot find the authority, will or courage to use the tools we have then the prospects for ultimate success are that much dimmer.

The Choice

Just as our current calamity was largely the result, albeit an unintended one, of the choices we have made as a nation, a state and a people over the span of generations, so will the our future be a function of the choices we need to begin making today. Too much attention has been focused on those voices that have seemed to call for the abandonment of our coast and its communities. The issue is not whether we must accept the decline and abandonment of our coast, but whether we want some other result. We have to recognize that if we stay the course we were on before these storms—and that we are still on—that by default it is our plan to perish as a region, as a culture, and as a community. The affirmative rejection of the policies, projects, and practices that make up our status quo is essential and urgent.

We are in difficult but not impossible times. The wisdom, courage, and resolve we display now will determine how bright our future is and how history judges us. This game is not over but time is not our friend. The choice is ours. The responsibility is ours. The choice is clear.