

The Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana

Toward a Commitment to our Coast, our Communities and our Future October 2005

The twin tragedies of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have exposed both the vulnerability of our coast and its communities, and underscored the great stake our nation has in their protection and stewardship. The storms have also forced a realization that federal, state, and local policies failed to adequately anticipate and respond to those threats in spite of a myriad of data, reports and cries for attention in the years and decades that preceded the disasters. But these disasters also carry with them the seeds of opportunity—the opportunity to craft and invest in a vision of a future in which coastal Louisiana is ecologically, culturally, and economically vibrant and sustainable. This opportunity must be seized.

In the days and weeks following these storms America has shown its capacity for compassion and generosity. On the federal side alone over \$60 billion has been appropriated to help respond to the humanitarian and community crises left by these storms. This public and private generosity is greatly appreciated by the citizens of Louisiana, but it will ultimately count for little if we do not commit to addressing the factors that led to this crisis. We can do nothing to prevent storms such as these but there is much we can do to prepare for them and reduce their impacts. Now is the time to invest in the integrated restoration of our coast and the protection of our communities. Now is the time to apply the lessons taught by these storms. This is an enormous challenge. We are not just responding to a storm, we are at a crossroads and the path we take will determine how history judges us.

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 on 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 Hurricane Katrina 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. (A specific target of achieving no net loss of coastal wetlands by some date and a net gain of X by some time could be inserted here.)

- 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 regards 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.
- 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. Consider providing planning assistance funds. Before local parishes can get OCS funds they must prepare a plan for submission 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. We should utilize 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.
- 7) **"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.