



Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana

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Planning for the Future of Southeastern Louisiana and the MRGO

Prepared by the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana

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Recent events have transformed all aspects of life in coastal Louisiana and no where is that more true than in southeastern Louisiana. The vulnerability of our communities and way of life are clearer now than ever before. So is the connection between a healthy coast and effective storm protection. The pace and scale of coastal conservation, restoration and storm protection efforts have been proven to be out of sync with the threats facing our coast and its communities, a fact most recently demonstrated by the deficiencies in the Corps of Engineers 2006 LACPR Interim Report. That must change and change now. Fortunately the State and the Army Corps of Engineers have each embarked upon ambitious efforts to meld coastal conservation and restoration with storm protection. This is our best and perhaps last chance to save - ecologically, culturally, and economically - what we know as south Louisiana.

The stakes are immense and half measures cannot be accepted. Previous storm protection, coastal conservation and restoration programs and projects were limited from the outset by financial constraints, public aversion to change, previously authorized projects and unrealistic assumptions about the stability of our coast, sea level and the nature of future storms. These are but a few of the reasons why we find ourselves with a collapsing coast and inadequate storm protection. We can no longer accept that line of thinking and we cannot think in terms of how much coast we can save for X dollars or how high a levee we can build for Y dollars. Instead, we must think in terms of restoring a functioning coast and protecting our communities to a clear and meaningful degree.

This sort of thinking is not new. Many commentators have noted that the Mississippi River levees were built to a much higher standard than we built our hurricane protection levees. In fact, the widely respected Dutch flood protection system frequently constructs dams to a much higher standard than our hurricane levees. However, if there is one thing we should be learning from the Dutch it is not how to duplicate their projects but rather how to approach their level of commitment. New Orleans currently has a flood protection system that recently failed for the second time in only 30 years. Now the Corps promises to enhance that system to provide protection against storm events that occur once every century. Comparatively, the Dutch aim for 10,000-year protection from recurring risks. The lesson for us is clear. Projects should be designed to fulfill the commitment, not to define the commitment. But what should the commitment be?

In broad terms we believe the commitment should be two-fold. First, we need to commit to a coast that is functionally vital and sustainable. Second, we must commit to at least 1000-year protection against recurring risks for our population centers, particularly those areas that already have hurricane defenses.

The elements of a vital and sustainable coast should at the least include habitat types, estuarine function, and elevation. The elements of storm protection should focus on a sustainable coast, effective structural elements such as levees, pumps and gates, land use planning and building codes, and effective evacuation plans and corridors. Until very recently we relied solely on levees and pumps for our protection. Hurricane Katrina proved that relying on just one element of protection will not be enough. Our planning must embrace them all.

Planning for the MRGO: The Key to Southeastern Louisiana

One of the key failures of all previous attempts to develop plans to save our coast or improve flood protection has been the fact that planning agencies viewed all previously authorized projects as fixtures of the landscape and felt compelled to include them in their efforts. This created enormous challenges and undermined both the effectiveness and the support for coastal restoration work. No case has proven this point as clearly as the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet.

In the past, no amount of critical comment could persuade the Army Corps of Engineers or state and local government to consider a future without the MRGO. That changed with Hurricane Katrina and it is now the official policy of the State of Louisiana to deauthorize the MRGO immediately. Congress has directed the Corps to develop a plan for deauthorizing the MRGO for deep draft navigation by December, 2006 and to further incorporate that plan into the Comprehensive Coastal Protection and Restoration Study (also known as the CAT 5 study) that they have been directed to complete by December, 2007. For the first time the Corps has been told to plan for a future that does not include the MRGO as a deep draft channel at least from the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway south.

Because time is so short for completing the MRGO study, it is critical that its purpose and scope be established quickly. We urge that the purpose and scope be set as follows:

Purpose: To develop a plan for the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet that results in its deauthorization as a deep draft channel (defined by the Corps to be 14 feet and above) south of the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway. Deauthorization plans should also facilitate coastal conservation and restoration efforts in the region and enhance the effectiveness of storm protection structures for Orleans, St. Bernard and eastern Plaquemines Parishes.

Scope: The planning effort should address the following specific issues:

1. What modifications to the MRGO's dimensions, operations, and/or maintenance need to be considered to facilitate wetland conservation and restoration? Specific attention should be given to addressing and facilitating the following:
 - a. The planning for the Caernarvon river reintroduction project contained in the 4th Supplemental Appropriations Bill.
 - b. The Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation's *Lines of Defense* proposal.
 - c. The suggestions put forth in *Envisioning the Future* published by the Gulf Science Team (the BP funded effort)
 - d. The Biloxi Marsh Land Co. proposal

- e. *A New Framework for Planning the Future of Coastal Louisiana after the Hurricanes of 2005*. (Boesch report)
 - f. The Louisiana Coastal Area plan (LCA)
 - g. St. Bernard Parish Plan
 - h. Any potential additional freshwater river introductions
 - i. Any potential or suggested water control structures cited in above mentioned plans
2. What modifications to the MRGO's dimensions, operations and/or maintenance need to be considered to improve the effectiveness of storm protection in the Orleans, St. Bernard and eastern Plaquemines Parish area? Specific attention should be given to the following:
- a. What level of protection is being sought? We again recommend providing population centers that already have hurricane protection levees with 1000-year protection against recurring risks.
 - b. What level of protection is realistically possible given the constraints of time, soils, and the like? Dollars should not be viewed as a constraint at this level of the analysis although financial considerations will ultimately factor into the equation when it is time to develop specific projects.
 - c. The following factors need to be considered, at the least, in evaluating storm risk.
 - i. Surge height
 - ii. Duration of surge
 - iii. Velocity of water
 - iv. The drivers of flooding risk in Orleans, St. Bernard and eastern Plaquemines parishes, both individually and collectively.
 - v. Where water will go if it is blocked in one area
 - vi. Possible directions of water movement from models of storms varying in intensity, track and velocity
3. What navigational uses are consistent with coastal conservation, restoration, storm protection, and Congressional direction that the Corps plan for the deauthorization of the MRGO, south of the GIWW, as a deep draft channel? Specific attention should be given to the following:
- a. Recreational boat use
 - b. Commercial fishing fleet use
 - c. General commerce/navigation use

Conclusion: Because it is increasingly clear that the MRGO driven planning for Southeastern Louisiana may be the first specific plan to be developed under the banner of the LACPR, it is vital that it get off on the right foot and meet its 6 month deadline. The success or failure of this effort may well determine the fate of the LACPR and the future of South Louisiana.