

TESTIMONY OF MARK DAVIS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE COALITION TO RESTORE COASTAL  
LOUISIANA

TO

HOUSE TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE, SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER  
RESOURCES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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My name is Mark Davis and I am the executive director of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana. On behalf of the Coalition, I would like to express our appreciation to the Committee and the Chairman for inviting us to speak with you about the urgent need to address the crisis that exists today in the lower Mississippi River delta and coastal plain, a place now known as America's Wetland.

The Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana is a broad based not-for-profit organization comprised of local governments, businesses, environmental and conservation groups, civic groups, recreational and commercial fishermen, and concerned individuals dedicated to the restoration and stewardship of the lower Mississippi River delta and Louisiana's chenier plain.

Let me begin by recognizing the astounding efforts put into the cause of coastal restoration and stewardship by the State of Louisiana, her federal partners and a great many environmental groups, business, landowners, academics, local governments and individuals over the past 15 years. Thanks to those efforts we now have the ability and the opportunity to chart a brighter future for our coast, our communities, and our natural heritage.

That said, let me clearly tell you that this nation and America's Wetland are facing a crisis. Despite the best efforts that have been marshaled to date, coastal Louisiana is still disappearing at the alarming rate of nearly 25 square miles each year. Without bold, decisive action Louisiana as we now know it--geographically, ecologically, culturally, and economically-- may cease to exist in the next 50-to-100 years. The resulting loss would be incalculable and the tragedy compounded by the knowledge that it did not have to be. If the unthinkable should occur, it will not be because we were overtaken by events, but because we did not rise to the challenge when there was still time.

On that point let me also make clear to the Committee that the Coalition firmly believes there is still time to act, but that it is running frighteningly short.

I would be pleased to provide the Committee with abundant evidence about the nature of this crisis and the many vital interests at risk. But in the brief time we have here I will focus on some of the factors that make this such an urgent matter and on the steps that must be taken now to secure this great treasure for ourselves and for future generations.

#### The Need for Action

When the crisis in our coast was first gaining attention in the late 1980s there was a general perception that somehow this was a local issue and that it was purely a "wetlands" issue. It is now clear that it is much more than that. Simply put, this is a survival issue of local, national and international importance. The very survival of one of the world's greatest ecologic, cultural and economic treasures is at stake. The price of doing too little or waiting too long will be measured in terms of dollars, lives, and our natural and cultural heritage.

The fundamental problem facing this coast is an induced collapse resulting from hydrologic changes and wetland conversions on a landscape scale. To be sure there are factors other than human activities that contribute to this situation, but it is beyond dispute that the principle drivers are related to efforts to confine the rivers, facilitate navigation and promote the exploration and production of oil, gas and other subsurface minerals. I do not say this critically but rather to make the simple point that for much of the last 150 years it was the aim of our society—and

often federal policy—to channelize our waterways, convert our wetlands, support the exploration, production and transportation of oil and gas, and facilitate deep-draft and coastal navigation. There were often very good reasons for those actions and policies but they came at a cost that was not adequately appreciated or understood at the time. Now we know the price of all that progress--over one million acres of land lost to subsidence and erosion since 1900 and a continuing loss of nearly 25 square miles each year.

The response to this calamitous land-loss must be systematic and long-term. To approach it too narrowly or with short-term fixes is to court certain disaster. The restoration effort we seek will not replace the million plus acres of land that have been lost. Rather, it will restore a functional balance to this coastal ecosystem, so that it becomes ecologically, culturally and economically sustainable. The key to sustainability is to work with the natural forces that built and nurtured these lands over thousands of years... I am speaking principally of the Mississippi River and its distributaries. For those who live along the river or in its coastal plain, it has always been necessary to balance and rebalance our relationship with the river and our waters. Many of the decisions that are now driving our coastal collapse at one time made it possible to live and prosper here, but unless a new balance is struck, and struck soon, this place will cease to exist as we know it. It is no exaggeration to say that the continued collapse of this area could claim tens of thousands of lives in increasingly flood-prone areas, wipe out one of the greatest biological and estuarine treasures in the world, and severely disrupt our nation's energy and transportation system.

There is still time to avert these tragedies, but this Committee and this Congress must act decisively.

## The Elements of Success

This crisis did not appear over night and was not caused by a single project or program. Similarly, it will take a concerted effort over time that is truly comprehensive in its scope to successfully restore this system to health and vitality. Fortunately, over the past decade much work has been done at the federal, state and local levels and in the academic and private sectors to assemble and vet the essential elements of a successful coastal restoration program. While there is still uncertainty about some points, enough is known to make a substantial start. There will always be an element of uncertainty to this business and we will always know more five or ten years hence, but just like a cancer patient who hopes that a miracle will be developed soon but who cannot wait to begin treatment. Our coast does not have the luxury of time. If anything we have waited too long.

Because of the urgency of this matter we are pleased that the Army Corps of Engineers and the State of Louisiana have prepared a draft near term restoration plan. We are also pleased that this Congress is now recognizing this as critical issue as it develops the 2005 Water Resources Development Act. In many ways the basic structure of the program set forth in the Senate's WRDA bill is sound though it is too narrow in scope and too tentative its project authorizations to be an acceptable next step in the restoration of America's Wetland. In the coming weeks it will be necessary to bring those various pieces together into an actual vehicle for creating at least the first phase of a truly effective and comprehensive coastal restoration and stewardship effort. To help that along we would like to make the following suggestions.

1. **Whatever is authorized must ultimately be part of a comprehensive effort.** It is vital that any near term program that is authorized include an authorization and direction that a comprehensive coastal plan be prepared and delivered to Congress. This comprehensive plan must be one that advances not only the construction and operation of coastal restoration projects but that provides a basis for integrating other vital public works such as flood control, navigation and fisheries management as well as regulatory programs into a consistent fabric that ensures sound stewardship and value for the investment of public resources. We believe that completion and delivery of this comprehensive plan should be required no later than July 1, 2008.
2. **Coordinate with ongoing coastal restoration programs and ensure meaningful agency involvement.** The restoration effort must engage the expertise of a range of federal agencies whose programs and expertise can be brought to bear on the resources, communities, and infrastructure of our coastal region and the Gulf of Mexico. The multi-agency task force created in the Senate's WRDA bill seems to be appropriately inclusive, though it is not clear what resources will be used to coordinate the Task Force's activities or to encourage the participation of the agencies other than the Army Corps of Engineers. Since many of these agencies are already funded to be part of the multi-agency task force created under the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection, and Restoration Act (CWPPRA), it may be desirable to link the functions of that task force with the task force proposed under WRDA to ensure both continuity and engagement. However given the lower level composition of the current CWPPRA task force it is vital that it not be substituted for the higher level policy and program coordinating task force envisioned under the Senate WRDA bill.
3. **Authorize and direct a plan for eliminating and addressing the adverse consequences of the MRGO.** The Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO) is acknowledged to be a major source of environmental degradation and land loss in southeastern Louisiana. The ultimate "closure" of this marginal federal navigation channel to prevent salt water migration, storm surges and continued bank erosion has been called for by the reconnaissance report for the Louisiana Coastal Area study, by a resolution of the Louisiana legislature, by local governments, and by a wide array of environmental, civic, and landowning interests. The Senate WRDA directs the Corps of engineers to prepare a plan for "modifying" the MRGO. We strongly support the explicit directive to the Corps to prepare such a plan but it must be clear that the plans for "modification" should not preclude the ultimate closure of the channel to deep-draft navigation. Clearly the interests of deep--and shallow-draft navigation must be considered in any coastal restoration effort, but any plan that does not deal effectively with the damage done (damage which is ongoing) by the MRGO is not an effective and comprehensive coastal restoration and stewardship plan. It is essential that Congress authorize and direct the

Corps to prepare this plan for the MRGO.

4. **Create a near term program of adequate scale and purpose.** The level of effort in the near-term plan should be appropriate in scale and purpose. While there may be good reasons for Congress to defer authorizing a full comprehensive program at this time, it is essential that what *is* authorized now contribute to and lay the groundwork for the ultimate comprehensive effort. At a minimum we urge that the following program elements and projects be included in any program considered by this Congress:
- a. A science and technology program that engages both agency and non-agency science and technical expertise to help craft and evaluate the success of coastal restoration projects. For such a program to produce significant value it must be clearly integrated into the development, sequencing, review and evaluation of the near term program and projects as well as in the development of the comprehensive plan. We appreciate that this science and technology program will not be a decision making body but rather an advisory and supportive program. But history teaches that unless such a program is created and integrated on the front end it simply does not get included in a meaningful way. I do not mean this as a criticism of any agency or existing program but rather as an honest recognition of how specific these bridges between programs and pools of expertise have to be for them to produce the sort of value it will take to make the survival of America's Wetland a reality. The State of Louisiana has recommended that this effort—which will in many ways be the applied research and development arm of the restoration effort as well as a key part of the adaptive management and public accountability facets of the program—be budgeted at \$100 million over ten years. We believe this is a sound figure and consider it essential to ensuring that public funds are invested in projects and activities about which there is a high degree of scientific confidence.
  - b. A demonstration or pilot-project program should be authorized to field test the technologies and techniques that will be used to implement the actual restoration projects included in the comprehensive plan. This program would demonstrate how innovative approaches or techniques, perhaps used elsewhere on a smaller scale, might work at the landscape-scale called for in this effort. These demonstrations will enable the Corps and the state to base programmatic decisions on real-world experience. The Senate WRDA provides for such a program but its funding limits, particularly the \$15-million-per-project cap, are a serious constraint. We believe the program proposed by the state is more realistic.
  - c. The authorization for construction of key projects that have been planned and developed under other federal authorities and are ready for implementation. These would include the following projects:
    - i. The Bayou LaFourche River Reintroduction Project. At the turn of the last century Bayou LaFourche was a major distributary of the Mississippi River and served as the principle conduit for river water to the vast marsh system in the lower Barataria-Terrebonne estuary.. Since the Bayou was effectively cut off from the river in 1904 its character and that of the wetlands it sustained have deteriorated significantly. The absence of this riverine influence can be seen on the landscape as areas that were once swamp and fresh marsh are becoming saltier or open water. Indeed this area is in the bull's eye of the land loss crisis in America's Wetland with loss rates exceeding 12 square miles a year at times. This area is critically important to the biological diversity and productivity of the Gulf of Mexico as well as being a vital part of the storm protection and drinking water supply to the communities, farms and businesses of the area. This project has been studied extensively under the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection, and Restoration Act and is now ready for action. While limited in scope, this project is a keystone project for this area that will improve the natural resources, provide tangible community benefits, and provide experience that will be essential to the design and implementation of larger scale projects for Barataria-Terrebonne region.
    - ii. The Maurepas Swamp River Reintroduction Project (Hope Canal). The Maurepas Swamps between the Mississippi River and Lake Maurepas were once fed by the waters of the Mississippi River. These swamps, which are among the largest cypress tupelo swamps in this nation, are a direct and vital part of the ecology of the wetland and estuarine system

that make up America's Wetland east of the Mississippi River. The leveeing of the River combined with other changes to the hydrology of the area, including the construction of I-10 and the opening of the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, have left this system effectively without a circulatory system and subject to higher salinities from the Gulf side. Without a source of sediment, nutrients and freshwater of the sort once provided by the river, this system is under great stress and dying. This project would not solve those problems but it could give the system a new lease on life to permit longer term solutions to be crafted.

iii. Barataria Basin Barrier Shoreline Restoration. The key to successful coastal restoration lies in reestablishing to a functional degree the natural processes that once built and sustained this coast for its many uses and values. The two main ingredients of a sustainable system are (1) riverine influence and (2) barrier shorelines to protect the interior systems and reduce tidal exchange. This project would work on the latter but needs to be understood in context with such projects as the Bayou Lafourche project discussed above and the Myrtle Grove project discussed below—you can't save this place just with river diversions or just with barrier shoreline restoration. The barrier shorelines of the Barataria Basin are among the most threatened in our nation and though, with the exception of Grand Isle, they are unpopulated they provide proven value as habitat for breeding and migratory birds as well as for fish, shrimp and crabs; storm buffers for natural and developed habitats; and protection and anchoring points for vital energy infrastructure such as oil and gas pipelines. In many ways these islands, particularly in the Caminada Headland area, are the border of our coast and the Gulf of Mexico—a border that is rapidly disappearing. Restoration of these barrier shorelines to a functional condition that can ultimately work with a rehabilitated interior hydrology is essential to the ultimate survival of this region. This is not a case in which the restoration is justified by the developmental value of the islands and shorelines but upon their value as natural habitats and natural defenses that provide distinct values for which there are no practical substitutes.

iv. Sediment Enriched River Reintroduction at Myrtle Grove. The river and its sediments are the fundamental building blocks of this coast and they are the very things that a restored coast must be built upon. This project would reestablish the full compliment of riverine resource (fresh water, nutrients and sediments) to an area that stands to lose more than 35,000 acres of land over the next ten years. This project would both help stem that loss by nurturing existing wetlands and create conditions for new wetland creation. This project has been the subject of extensive studies and work under the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection, and Restoration Act and is now ready for further action.

We cannot emphasize enough the urgency of not only acting at this time but acting wisely and at a level that can make a difference. This is not just another water project or conservation initiative, it is a legacy issue by which history will judge our stewardship. It is a challenge we can't afford not to meet.

We would like to thank the Committee again for the opportunity to appear here and we pledge to be of whatever assistance we can be to the Committee and the Congress as it moves ahead with the enormous challenge of saving our coast and safeguarding our future.

Respectfully submitted,

Mark Davis  
Executive Director