

# Crab Lines



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## *Two Years After: A Coastal Restoration Update*

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In this post-Katrina and Rita era of our history, I often hear the words, “Everything has changed”. I agree with that only somewhat.

Surely the lives of thousands of our people have changed and there is still much confusion and suffering as most of south Louisiana tries desperately to rebuild their lives. At the same time, though, most of us did not need the devastation from these events to remind us that the entire future of coastal Louisiana is directly dependant on what we do to rebuild our coastal landscape. I submit that the importance of our wetland system to our entire way of life remains unchanged in the aftermath of the events of 2 years ago.

What I do see as a change since Katrina and Rita is in the attitude of our public towards restoration and flood protection. There is a very apparent new sense of urgency among our public that has driven our state and federal agencies into new restoration and flood protection planning efforts. There is also a very apparent desire among all of us to quickly get beyond the planning and get to the real business of rebuilding our coast. Restoration planning, of course, is important, but it is only important because it can lead to a more efficient, effective, and quicker rebuilding of our critically needed coastal landscape. We cannot lose site of this ultimate goal.

## **The State Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority Master Plan (CPRA)**

The new state restoration plan (known as the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority Master Plan or CPRA State Master Plan) has been completed and approved by the Louisiana Legislature during the 2007 session. It is a very ambitious plan that addresses the entire coast of Louisiana. It presents a plan to build hurricane protection levees, coastal marshes, ridges, and barrier island features. River diversions, from small volume to very large volume, use of sediment harvested with dredges, the use of levees, and many other strategies are proposed in the CPRA State Master Plan. The most common figure I hear from state officials is \$50 billion to fully implement the state plan.

Our (the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program or BTNEP) efforts in this planning process were focused on supporting the large-scale use of sediments harvested from the Mississippi and Atchafalaya River beds to rebuild the wetlands, natural ridges, and barrier islands that have disappeared in recent times. These sediments can be directed from these riverine sediment deposits through a system of pipes that would be laid out through open-water routes to transport them in a “slurry” form to exactly where they are needed to rebuild our coast.

The state master plan includes this very promising restoration technique that would result in the quickest land rebuilding possible.

The use of this technique as a land–rebuilding strategy would allow for a significant portion of our coastal system to be rebuilt while still retaining some of our current uses that depend on a “band” of salt and brackish marshes near the Gulf of Mexico. The BTNEP and many others working in coastal restoration feel that this is important because it would mean that the people that depend on harvesting the fisheries of our wetlands could continue their way of life and would be more willing to accept a relatively small change to the place that provides for their way of life. We believe that restoration must proceed quickly and that we cannot afford the delays that would be caused by using strategies that would result in long, drawn-out disagreements among the people that would be affected by restoration strategies that would overpower or eradicate a way of life that has survived here for a very long time. We just cannot afford to lose that time.

Rebuilding coastal land masses with harvested sediment is important, but it’s only part of the overall solution. The use of strategies to sustain what we would re-build is also important. Most of the wetlands we are losing -- the forested wetlands, such as cypress swamps, and the fresh and intermediate marshes -- are being impacted by salt water that intrudes up into these regions as the barrier islands and salt and brackish marshes to the south subside and erode away. So as the fresh marsh systems are rebuilt with sediments harvested and then transported from our river beds, we must use river diversions – fresh water - to sustain them.

While we may all agree that fresh water is an essential component of restoration, there are difficult and contentious questions that are still being debated: How much freshwater from the river do we use? How much do we need? How much can we take out of the river and still allow enough to remain for navigation? How much can we take out of the great river without causing salt water to move up from the Gulf to New Orleans and contaminating the drinking water supply? What is the land-building capacity of the river today as compared to the thousands of years ago before the locks and dams in the upper watershed began trapping sediments upstream?

The use of water diversions, both very large and some very small, is a component of the state master plan. The decision as to what magnitude of river diversion we will use in the future will be very much a political one, in my opinion. We believe that time is not on our side. We believe that there is an obvious need to use strategies that will result in the quickest coastal rebuilding possible. The future of our coastal parishes depends on it. We are very vulnerable at this time in our history and can not rely solely on the same geologic time-span that it took nature to build the higher dry land that we live on today and the wetter, low lands that have protected us for generations.

## **The Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration Plan (La CPR)**

Another major restoration planning effort, a federal one known as the La Coastal Protection and Restoration Plan (LaCPR), has proceeded at the same time as the state planning effort. The acronyms are understandably confusing, especially to our general public. It helps if

you understand that when the state plan is mentioned that it is usually called the CPRA plan. The federal restoration plan is generally called the La CPR plan. Much like the state master plan, there are strategies in the plan that use levees, freshwater diversions, and the pipeline transport of sediments harvested from river bottoms to provide protection or to restore our coast.

The federal restoration plan (La CPR), was ordered by the U.S. Congress shortly following Katrina and Rita. It is a hugely massive effort involving direct participation with multiple federal and state agencies. This federal plan is in progress, but must be submitted to the U.S. Congress by December 2007 and it must, by congressional decree, be prepared in collaboration with the State of Louisiana's Master Plan.

The federal plan (La CPR) involves what many have characterized as one of the most comprehensive storm surge modeling efforts ever done. The modeling part of this planning effort is taking longer than anticipated. The modeling effort is important though.

I'm not a "modeler" by any stretch of the imagination, but I've often attempted to explain modeling to non-technical audiences as a human attempt to represent the incredible complexity and ever-changing condition of the non-human natural world. Modeling, very basically, is a computer-based tool used by engineers and coastal scientists to answer questions. A coastal hurricane surge model attempts to represent the interactions between water movement, land masses, wind speed, wind duration, wind direction, etc, and any variation that might occur in the natural world. Knowing this, it is easy to understand the complexities involved.

The quantity of data that is needed to build a computer model that will produce credible answers is immense. Adding to the complexity is the many different possibilities that must be considered: How fast is the storm moving? From what direction is it moving? How strong are the winds? The possible combinations are numerous and to plan for the protection we need, we must be able to predict what might happen under these various conditions.

One of the questions that we need answered is: what exactly are the protection benefits that wetland habitats provide to our communities? How much storm surge protection do they provide? Most of us strongly believe and understand that there are storm surge benefits provided by wetlands, but exactly what those benefits are is very important when you have to decide how high you must build a levee. The preliminary results of the Corps of Engineers' modeling effort so far are indicating that coastal landscape features surely do play an important role in the overall picture of protecting our communities. The exact role and the exact quantity of protection that our wetland system provides is expected soon.

## **The Water Resources Development Act (WRDA)**

The Water Resources Development Act or WRDA (another acronym) is the congressional "tool" or act that authorizes federal money for many of the very large public projects in the various states of our country. It is very important to know that WRDA only authorizes potential funding. It does not actually fund the projects. It's very much like being granted a fishing license. When you are issued a fishing license, you are given permission to use the money that you earn to buy a boat and rod and reel or a cane pole to hopefully catch fish.

Similarly, when a WRDA bill passes, it means that you are given permission to seek (or “earn”) funds for a WRDA-listed project. Funding occurs through another process called appropriation.

If WRDA is eventually passed and the funds for WRDA projects are eventually appropriated, the money would fund projects that the Corps of Engineers builds. In the past a WRDA (you will hear it pronounced, wer-da) bill is passed by congress every 2 years. In recent times though, we have not seen a WRDA bill passed for over 6 years, so there are a number of massive projects all over the U.S. that have remained unfunded and “un-built” for an unusually long time period.

There are many projects that are of vital importance to Louisiana in the current version of the WRDA bill. There are potentially billions of dollars for coastal restoration and coastal protection in this bill that has again stalled in the federal process. The WRDA bill has passed the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate is poised to pass it by a large margin, but the President has threatened to veto it should it pass the both houses.

The threatened presidential veto of the WRDA bill has been the subject of a very understandable amount of disappointment among all of us that live in coastal Louisiana. We can not afford to fix our coast alone. We need this funding. Our state and federal elected officials know this, and I believe that they are as disappointed with this veto threat as we all are. Writing to our own delegation to express our views is always important. But in this case, I know of no one in our Louisiana congressional delegation that still needs to be convinced that restoring coastal Louisiana is important. They understand this. Write to our delegation to show support, if you desire. But if you have friends and relatives in other states, you may want to focus some attention there.

## **Final Thoughts**

I have never, ever in the 33 years that I have been involved with these issues, been this busy. My staff in the BTNEP, my colleagues and friends in the federal, state, and local agencies, and the environmental groups that we work with have never seen such a busy time. This is a good sign. It gives me hope that we will implement these latest plans. I take this as a sign that we are serious this time.

The surge in media interest from all over the world related to Louisiana coastal issues is absolutely unprecedented. The interest of the entire globe seems to be focused on south Louisiana’s coastal restoration effort. I spend a huge amount of my time explaining our situation to anyone that will listen. I do so gladly because there is a great need to educate the nation and the world, to correct the rampant misperceptions about us that are “out” there.

We are a different people living in a different sort of land. There are few places such as this in the U.S. For generations we have lived here. More importantly, for generations we have stayed here. Our ancestors were drawn here because of what this region produced in such bounty. We stay because it is a good place to live. There are few places on earth like this. Where else could you experience such a rich mixture of cultures that can trace their presence here back for several generations?

I was pleased to see that there are homes all over the U.S. that plan to host a special showing of *Washing Away: Losing Louisiana* on the August 29, 2007, the anniversary of Katrina and the “near-anniversary” of Rita. We need for the rest of the nation to understand how the restoration of our wetlands affects our lives. Two years after Rita and Katrina, *Washing Away* is still a very pertinent documentary that makes these essential points to a nation that may not understand us.

I don't think anyone here expects to be made immune from hurricanes. I believe that most of us only want to see our system returned to a point where we can expect a reasonable level of protection. My hope for us is that we will reach an acceptable level of risk. The level of risk we are experiencing now is not acceptable. This higher level of risk is directly attributable to the collapse of the wetlands that once clothed, protected, and sustained our communities. Our wetlands have collapsed while we have lived here and it is causing our people to leave for places that they believe are safer.

Losing this south Louisiana culture, a way of life that has intrigued, mesmerized, and perhaps perplexed the world, would be the ultimate tragedy. That is most assuredly not acceptable!

I would also like to mention that, this week, nationwide, workshops and symposia are featuring “Washing Away”, a one-hour documentary developed by America's Wetland Campaign and Louisiana Public Broadcasting (LPB).

The aftermaths of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita are examined from six Louisianans, including chef Leah Chase; farmer Errol Domingue; shrimper and former restaurant owner Preston Dore; Director of Port Fourchon, Ted Falgout; and Kerry St. Pé, the BTNEP Director, and Marlon Horton, a New Orleans singer and resident who videotaped Katrina.

Also, “Washing Away” can be seen on the Louisiana Public Broadcasting channel on Tuesday, August 28th at 9:00 pm with a repeat the following Sunday September 2nd at 5:00 pm. To learn more about the film visit the Web at <http://www.lpb.org/programs/washingaway/video.html>



P.S. No...I'm very sorry to say that I have not finished my kayak...yet. Hey...it's going to happen! Maybe it will be finished for the BTNEP 2008 Paddle Bayou Lafourche trip???