

TESTIMONY OF STEVEN PEYRONNIN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
OF THE COALITION TO RESTORE COASTAL LOUISIANA

TO

U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS

June 16, 2009

My name is Steven Peyronnin 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 the invitation to testify about the progress of restoration efforts under the Louisiana Coastal Area (LCA) authorization, Title VII WRDA 2007.

The Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana is a non-profit, advocacy organization comprised of businesses, local governments, industries, scientific communities, environmental and conservation organizations, civic and faith-based groups and a broad spectrum of concerned citizens who share our mission of restoring and protecting a sustainable coastal Louisiana.

The views that I express here are supported by broader environmental and conservation interests as well, namely the Environmental Defense Fund, the National Audubon Society and the National Wildlife Federation, that have partnered with our organization to focus national attention and action on the current land loss crisis in coastal Louisiana.

In the past 75 years, Louisiana has lost more than 2300 square miles of coastal wetlands. Roughly translated, this is an area equivalent to the entire state of Delaware that has simply disappeared. While a fraction of wetland loss in Louisiana is attributable to the natural deltaic process typified by alternating cycles of deposition and subsidence, substantial human alteration of this landscape is responsible for the majority of Louisiana's coastal land loss.

Mississippi River levees built to facilitate and maintain navigation and flood protection have choked off Mississippi River sediment that once built and sustained this vast deltaic complex. Additionally, thousands of miles of oil and gas pipelines and canals that provide essential energy to the nation now slice through Louisiana's wetlands, introducing damaging levels of saltwater and hastening the erosion of this sediment starved landscape. Further compounding the demise

of this subsiding ecosystem is the inevitable challenge posed by intense and frequent hurricanes and the implications of climate change and relative sea level rise.

Amidst the challenge of restoring this magnificent landscape is the recognition that the Louisiana delta is a working delta, supporting unique cultures and communities as well as critical energy extraction and processing infrastructure. It provides both a nursery for the Gulf of Mexico's vast fisheries and a home for fishing fleets. It is the largest navigation gateway for food, fiber, and fuels produced by, and imported into, the United States. As four hurricanes in less than five years have shown, this system-wide collapse poses a serious threat to urban and coastal populations, domestic energy production, critical navigation infrastructure, abundant fisheries, and world-renown Louisiana cultures and communities.

Efforts to implement the LCA program must have a sense of urgency

Without immediate and decisive action, Louisiana will continue to lose land at an alarming rate, potentially losing another 500 square miles of land by the year 2050. The implications are severe but despite these obstacles, it is still possible to restore Louisiana's coastal landscape to a sustainable and productive state.

Decades of science and planning have made it clear that we possess the scientific, technical and engineering expertise to restore sustainability to this landscape and at the same time provide sustainable protection to vulnerable coastal communities and urban population centers. What is lacking is a clear sense of urgency to embrace the restoration program authorized by Congress.

While coastal restoration has been recognized as a priority for decades, the inherent link between a healthy coast and sustainable hurricane protection became clear following the storms of 2005. Since that time the Corps of Engineers has demonstrated a clear sense of urgency in implementing hurricane levee improvements in the New Orleans area and working to complete all modifications and enhancements by 2011. Their efforts to rebuild and enhance levees in New Orleans demonstrates what is possible with a clear sense of urgency, priority and commitment, but it is clearly evident that restoration efforts have not met with the same sense of urgency and commitment.

Scientific analysis has demonstrated that there is a clear benefit to the effectiveness of levees when they are buffered by wetlands. Considering the tremendous federal investment in hurricane levees, it is imperative that we protect and enhance that investment by devoting the same sense of urgency to ecosystem restoration efforts that substantially reduce the risk of flooding, amplify protection levels and reduce the impact of storms and surge on the present levee system.

Over four years ago the Chief of Engineers submitted a final report clearly recognizing the severe wetland loss occurring along coastal Louisiana. The report recommended 5 critical near term ecosystem restoration features based on their relatively advanced investigations and their ability to be implemented expeditiously. Congress acknowledged that sense of urgency by authorizing those 5 initial projects for construction under the LCA. Despite the clear path articulated in the authorization, only one project is scheduled to begin construction before 2012.

Not only is the lack of progress a troubling obstacle to restoring a sustainable coast, but it has also negated the ability to leverage Federal opportunities that could provide desperately needed funding streams and a strong sense of urgency. Without a single project ready for construction, LCA projects were not considered in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 because they fell far short of the shovel ready requirement intended to urgently move projects forward.

A comprehensive plan is essential to success

The authorization of the LCA was viewed by many as the first deliberate step toward a programmatic restoration plan for coastal Louisiana. Within the LCA, Congress authorized not only 5 near term projects for construction, but also directed the Secretary of the Army to formulate a long-term comprehensive plan. Among the most critical elements of the authorized LCA plan were the requirements for specific, measurable success criteria and a prioritized list of projects. Many scientists agree that it is not possible to restore the landscape of coastal Louisiana to historic conditions. This conclusion leads to the critical question of exactly how much of Louisiana's coast can be restored and sustained and which areas are the most essential. Without the most basic understanding of what a successful restoration program should achieve

and what elements or projects are the most important, it is nearly impossible to implement a program that effectively and efficiently prioritizes limited resources in an expedited manner.

Integrating restoration with protection

In the absence of a long term, integrated restoration plan, there is currently no framework for how restoration efforts work with protection activities. The Corps of Engineers has instead relied on the Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration Technical Report (LaCPR), or “Category 5” report, to evaluate coastal restoration based solely on the existing landscape’s capacity to reduce storm surge. Despite technical modeling that indicates a reduction in storm surge by the existing landscape, the Corps of Engineers has not initiated any additional technical analyses that would quantify the additional surge reduction capacities associated with expanded restoration efforts. As a result, the LaCPR report proposes simply maintaining the current landscape as the only ecosystem alternative for storm, hurricane and flood protection.

Mississippi River management must prioritize restoration

In the absence of a long term, integrated restoration plan, there is currently no framework for how restoration efforts work with navigation activities. For nearly a century the Corps of Engineers has managed the Mississippi River to control flooding and to maximize and maintain navigation. This management model constructed levees to harness the river for safety and protection, constricting the deposition of sediment that once built and sustained the coast of Louisiana. That same sediment, now confined and concentrated in a narrow river, was quickly categorized as an impediment to navigation. Levees and jetties were intentionally designed to funnel sediments beyond the continental shelf, eliminating them from the deltaic wetland system. The unintended consequence of this narrow management practice has devastated an entire ecosystem, jeopardizing irreplaceable habitat and fisheries and exposing coastal communities and vital national infrastructure to storms and hurricanes. Ironically it is this exact practice of management that is now the greatest threat to disrupt navigation and flood protection on the Lower Mississippi River.

Stated very simply, managing the lower Mississippi River system strictly for navigation and flood control purposes has created a system that is geologically unstable and systematically

unsustainable. Dredging costs are escalating as sea level rise forces sediment deposition further up the River. Wetland loss exposes navigation levees to the full brunt of storm surge that could eventually compromise their integrity and elevate surge levels far upstream. This collapse not only threatens the ecosystem but ultimately threatens the sustainability of the entire River system. In concept, the sustainability of the navigation system and the deltaic ecosystem are intertwined. They share the common objective of removing sediment from the lower River that in turn can restore the ecosystem that ultimately protects the integrity of the entire system.

This suggests a comprehensive solution to Louisiana's coastal collapse that entails real integration of navigation and flood protection goals into a coastal restoration framework. Elevating restoration within Mississippi River management as an equal priority is no longer a matter of preference, economic justification or public safety; it is a matter of maintaining the comprehensive sustainability of the entire lower Mississippi River system.

Leveraging the full Federal commitment

As evidenced by the broad range of impacts of coastal land loss, comprehensive restoration efforts will have implications that span across the missions and capacities of multiple Federal agencies. The LCA authorization addressed this by requiring the comprehensive plan to describe the role of other Federal and State agencies in carrying out a long-term restoration program and by also establishing a Task Force of Federal and State entities to make recommendations and leverage financial support.

The Federal government has invested significant resources in hurricane recovery and protection, not solely through the Corps of Engineers but through multiple Federal agencies as well. Without a framework for additional engagement these resources are often disconnected and disjointed, reducing the ability to fully leverage a comprehensive Federal commitment. Without a Task Force, a programmatic approach to comprehensive restoration lacks critical input from various Federal agencies with specific expertise and resources and an absence of diverse input into critical decisions.

Accountability and capacity

The hurricanes of 2005 demonstrated that we cannot wait until after a natural disaster to insist on accountability. Scientists estimate that restoration efforts in coastal Louisiana have less than a decade before our chances of success are significantly reduced. Accountability simply must be a perpetual element of any effective program. But accountability must be balanced with the capacity to succeed.

At the heart of a meaningful and urgent commitment to restoration is a corresponding commitment to the capacity required to meet established deadlines and objectives. If urgency is a priority, the capacity of those charged with restoration must reflect that priority.

Given the sheer scope and complexity of comprehensive protection and restoration in coastal Louisiana, we must recognize that a true commitment will likely constitute the largest ecosystem restoration program in the history of the world. Consequently we must ensure that Federal entities charged with the execution of a comprehensive restoration program have the capacity to meet that challenge. Where a single agency or entity lacks resources or authority, Congress has authorized the inclusion of multiple Federal entities to enhance capacity.

Recommendations

The progress toward comprehensive coastal restoration in Louisiana has clearly stalled within the confines of the traditional Corps of Engineers process. The delay of LCA projects and the failure to comply with Congressional direction clearly demonstrate that the traditional model for project development and implementation is ill-suited to respond to this crisis. Under this traditional model, major policy and project decisions are often dictated by obstacles or governed by constraints rather than driven by objectives or fueled by a sense of urgency. As a result, inaction often becomes the most likely alternative to difficult decisions despite the fact that inaction is the most costly alternative. If this pattern of delay continues, it will eliminate any chance of success.

In short Congress authorized a comprehensive set of tools not just to execute 5 projects, but to initiate a broader comprehensive program. To embrace the authority bestowed by Congress we recommend:

- Immediate steps should be taken to convene the Coastal Louisiana Ecosystem Protection and Restoration Task Force (Task Force) to leverage the full Federal commitment and capacities of Federal entities. The Council on Environmental Quality is uniquely positioned to lead this effort with statutory responsibility under NEPA for environmental oversight of all Federal agencies and interagency decision-making on environmental matters.
- The Task Force should review the project development path for the 5 construction projects authorized under Sec 7006(c)(1) and recommend opportunities to streamline and expedite the implementation of these near-term priorities.
- The Secretary of the Army, in conjunction with the Task Force, should immediately commence development of the comprehensive plan authorized under LCA to ensure that measurable success criteria and a prioritized project list are integrated with navigation and hurricane protection efforts.

I offer this testimony today with a mixed sense of disappointment over the lack of progress of restoration efforts in coastal Louisiana, and a sense of optimism that there is still an opportunity to redirect and recommit to meaningful and urgent action.

Respectfully submitted,



Steven Peyronnin

Executive Director

Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana