

## Report gives nod to plan for coast

**But other measures needed too, it says**

Thursday, November 10, 2005

By Mark Schleifstein

**Staff writer**

The proposed 10-year, \$1.9 billion federal-state coastal restoration plan should be approved even though it alone is not adequate to reduce Louisiana's chronic loss of wetlands and coastline, according to a report released Wednesday by a national science and engineering research group.

"Taken individually, the majority of the projects proposed in the LCA (Louisiana Coastal Area Ecosystem Restoration) study are based on commonly accepted, sound scientific and engineering analyses," the report by the National Research Council said. "It is not clear, however, that in the aggregate, these projects represent a scientifically sound strategy for addressing coastal erosion at the scale of the affected area."

The report also says people living in coastal areas need to be informed of what the future coastline will look like and that many of them will have to move inland as their homes, businesses and communities are overtaken by encroaching Gulf waters.

During a news conference Wednesday, members of the committee that wrote the report recommended reconsideration of a major project to reinforce and "armor" the sides of the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet.

The report by the 12-member panel of scientists and engineers was requested by federal and state officials looking for independent "peer review" of the coastal restoration program, which University of Florida civil and coastal engineering professor Robert Dean dubbed the most ambitious ecological restoration project in the nation's history.

The National Research Council is part of the National Academy of Science, which often conducts studies of scientific and engineering issues for federal agencies and Congress.

Release of the study comes as Congress is considering a bill authorizing the near-term restoration plan, and a supplemental appropriations bill that includes language authorizing an \$8 million study of a proposal to provide protection to Louisiana's coastal communities from Category 5 hurricanes.

**Coordination urged**

The report recommends that any protection measures stemming from this year's hurricanes, including raised levees, be closely coordinated with the restoration program.

Dean said the committee found stakeholders living along Louisiana's coast -- politicians, businesses, residents, scientists -- in unusual agreement supporting the restoration effort.

But he said the committee was still concerned that the federal-state plan has failed to adequately define the risks to those stakeholders of what individual restoration projects will and won't do.

He warned that many people and businesses might have to move inland because their land won't be saved, that some fishing resources will be disrupted for years while new wetlands reach environmental maturity, and that the expense of maintaining rebuilt land and wetlands will be required "in perpetuity."

Despite the committee's criticisms of some plan provisions, officials with the Army Corps of Engineers, Louisiana's governor's office and environmental groups said they agreed with most of its recommendations.

**MR-GO fix criticized**

Most controversial among those recommendations will be reconsideration of a proposal to place 38 miles of rocks along the banks of the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet, which the report said "is the most poorly documented" piece of the restoration proposal.

"We felt that was probably not the best use of the available funds, at least at this time," Dean said.

The corps has been considering whether to reduce the depth of the MR-GO for several years. State and local officials had long argued that the shortcut route from the Gulf of Mexico has eroded much of the St. Bernard Parish marsh around Lake Borgne and increased the threat of hurricane storm surge topping levees around Chalmette. That's just what happened during Katrina, they say.

Such a move would require Congress to change its rules authorizing the channel, which is used by an average of 5.5 ships a day.

Tim Axtman, corps project manager for the restoration program, said the corps has expanded the scope of the MR-GO project in a later version of the coast plan to include more environmental restoration.

But Mark Davis, executive director of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, said the project still would be siphoning away dollars better spent on creating wetlands.

"There may be a reason to rock that thing, but it's certainly not coastal restoration," Davis said. "In the wake of the vote from Mother Nature that this is not a deep draft channel that should be open, we should declare the MR-GO closed and move on."

#### Mapping who goes where

Dean and other committee members said the most important part of developing a longer-term restoration plan while the first projects are under construction will be development of a map that will require federal and state planners, in cooperation with stakeholders, to make permanent decisions about where people will live and work in the future -- and what people and businesses will have to be relocated inland.

Drawing the map will confirm to the public that the wetland rebuilding process will be unable to restore the state's historic coastline and that a number of existing communities will be in danger of disappearing, the report said.

The report was critical of the 2004 decision by the federal Office of Management and Budget to limit the scope of the initial restoration plan to projects that could begin construction within 10 years, which resulted in mostly smaller projects being included in the plan. A previous version of the plan covered 30 years and included proposals to begin research on larger restoration projects.

Dean said there were both advantages and disadvantages resulting from the OMB decision, which was vehemently opposed by state and local officials.

"One advantage is the inherent accountability and the need to demonstrate progress," Dean said.

But the report also concluded that there needed to be more focus on projects that will take more than 10 years to design and begin construction and that could take 20 or 30 years before restoration results are achieved.

Sidney Coffee, adviser to Gov. Kathleen Blanco on coastal issues, agreed.

"We were dismayed that we were forced away from a comprehensive long-term plan" by the OMB decision to reduce the scope of the restoration program to the first 10 years, Coffee said. "That's why we're pushing so hard for completing the comprehensive plan and melding that into the comprehensive hurricane coastal protection plan."

#### Opening new channel

One longer-term proposal, dubbed the "Third Delta" is recommended for further study as part of the near-term plan. It calls for a new channel to be cut from the Mississippi River near Donaldsonville to deliver sediment into Barataria and Terrebonne bays, where the most rapid subsidence and erosion of existing wetlands is occurring.

The National Research Council report concluded that the 65-mile conveyance channel called for in that project faces major landowner resistance that could cause years of delays, and it recommends that an alternative plan be considered, either instead of the Third Delta or alongside it.

The report's recommendation is to build a large diversion project on the west bank of the Mississippi River between New Orleans and the Head of Passes, which also would funnel sediment toward the Barataria and Terrebonne areas.

Moving the sediment west, however, will probably toll the end of the existing birdfoot delta at the mouth of the Mississippi River. And it would require turning Southwest Pass, the entrance to the river from the Gulf of Mexico, into a slack-water channel that would require more frequent and expensive dredging.

However, the material dredged from the channel would be used to create additional new wetlands, under the plan.

A similar proposal several years ago that would have rerouted part of the river's water and sediment into California Bay on the east side of the river was opposed by deep-draft shipping interests concerned about access to the ports of New Orleans and Baton Rouge.

Copies of "Drawing Louisiana's New Map: Addressing Land Loss in Coastal Louisiana" will be available later this year from the National Academies Press; (202) 334-3313 or 1-(800) 624-6242 or on the Internet at <http://www.nap.edu>.

[http://www.theadvocate.com/stories/111005/new\\_report001.shtml](http://www.theadvocate.com/stories/111005/new_report001.shtml)

## Report: Wetlands work inadequate

### Study vindicates La. in restoration plans, state officials argue

By **AMY WOLD**

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Advocate staff writer

The current federally approved plan for coastal restoration is a start, but it doesn't come close to addressing the massive problem of coastal land loss in Louisiana, according to a report released Wednesday from the National Academies' National Research Council.

That's exactly what state officials and researchers in Louisiana told the federal government last year after being told to scale back their comprehensive restoration plan.

"What they're saying is we're on the right track, but we're not doing it big enough," Gerald Duszynski, acting assistant secretary of the state Department of Natural Resources Office of Coastal Restoration and Management, said of the new report.

The report is the result of a Louisiana request to examine the science and impact of a coastal restoration strategy.

The scope of that study changed last year after the federal Office of Management and Budget requested that a comprehensive plan submitted by the state and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers be scaled back to a "near-term" plan.

The near-term plan involves about \$1.2 billion over 10 years for research, planning and construction of a limited suite of projects.

The academies' report says that's not going to be enough to address the loss of an estimated 24 square miles of coastal land a year.

"We cannot give people the expectation of a sustainable coast and then put on a Band-Aid," said Robert Twilley, director of the Wetland Biogeochemistry Institute at LSU.

The report recommends that restoration planners create a map of what the coastline of Louisiana should look like when restoration is completed and then design the projects.

"We need a map. We need a business plan," said Shea Penland, director of the Pontchartrain Institute for Environmental Sciences at the University of New Orleans. "We are resource limited, and by drawing a map we can conserve our limited resources to do something."

The report hints that the state also needs to consider which areas need to be abandoned as unsalvageable -- even going so far as using the phrase "managed retreat."

Duszynski said state officials will have a tough time telling a community it is being written off and nothing will be done about it.

"If you live in another state, that's easy to say," Duszynski said. "If you're down here, we're not prepared to do that yet."

Sidney Coffee, executive assistant for coastal activities in the Office of the Governor, said the state has never claimed that the ultimate goal is to restore the entire coast to some historical level.

She also said the state isn't ready to draw a map yet because the process would take a tremendous amount of public input.

Another section of the report points out that the goal of the restoration plan is to build land, but not all of the restoration projects selected seem to focus on that.

Tim Axtman, program manager with the Corps of Engineers, said the report notes that "if the biggest symptom is loss of land, then you should really focus on projects that deliver sediment."

He said the report seems to push the idea of large freshwater diversion projects being a solution, but doesn't address the concern that those projects could drastically affect the fisheries and ecology of the areas of impact.

To build up land, fresh water is needed; however, once fresh water is introduced, then fish species in that area will change, Twilley said.

"This is where you have to be honest with people," Twilley said. "We've got some hard decisions to make."

Penland said he has larger problems with the report's push for freshwater diversions because those projects won't do enough, fast enough.

"They'll take decades at the soonest to bring the services on line that we need," Penland said.

In order to work, coastal restoration needs to proceed at the same pace, or quicker than, the rate of coastal loss -- which means projects need to build 20 square miles a year just to stay even, he said.

"Freshwater diversions will not get us there," Penland said.

The focus, he said, should be on placing large amounts of soil in the marsh through dredging and other means.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/10/national/nationalspecial/10marsh.html>

November 10, 2005

## **Hard Choices Seen in Efforts to Help Louisiana Wetlands**

By [CORNELIA DEAN](#)

Restoring [Louisiana's](#) vanished wetlands, or even maintaining those that remain, will be impossible, according to an expert panel convened in 2004 by the National Academy of Sciences to consider a major proposal for wetlands restoration in the state.

The panel says the time has come for state and local governments, businesses and citizens to start talking about which wetland areas can be preserved and which must be abandoned, a process it called "managed retreat."

The experts, in a report issued yesterday, said the proposal they studied, put forward by the state and the Army Corps of Engineers, had worthwhile elements but would not come close to halting wetland loss.

Dan Walker, a geologist who directed the study for the academy, said the panel hoped to encourage "an explicit discussion of what coastal Louisiana should look like."

"If we don't draw this map," Mr. Walker added, "nature will."

The panel considered an area of about 12,000 square miles from [Texas](#) to [Mississippi](#). Wetlands there support fishing in the Gulf of Mexico, much of the nation's oil and gas production, a growing eco-tourism industry and Louisiana's rich Cajun culture. But since the 1930's, a total of 1,900 square miles of marsh - an area about the size of [Delaware](#) - has been lost beneath the spreading waters of the gulf, according to the United States Geological Survey.

Many in Louisiana also consider the wetlands a major defense against coastal storms like Hurricane Katrina, an idea panel members discounted. Though robust marshes may dampen the effects of minor storms, for a storm like Katrina "our unanimous feeling was no, it would not have made any difference," said one member, Joseph Kelley, a coastal scientist at the University of Maine.

The panel, convened by the National Research Council, the academy's research arm, was charged with evaluating a proposal developed after the White House Office of Management and Budget complained that a predecessor plan, the 30-year, \$13 billion Louisiana Coastal Area study, was too large, cost too much and looked too far into the future.

The revised proposal, which the panel calls the short-term L.C.A. plan, comprises five main projects, with an estimated cost of \$1.9 billion, that could get under way in 5 to 10 years. Tim Axtman, a project manager for the Corps of Engineers, said the plan's relatively narrow time frame was a response "to the guidance of the Bush administration," and added that there was wide agreement in the corps that "you need to think about where you go long term."

The projects are: an embankment along the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, a canal that runs from the river at New Orleans southeast to the gulf; construction of levee culverts to carry river water into the Maurepas Swamp, between New Orleans and Baton Rouge; and three projects south of New Orleans - a river diversion to support wetlands in the Barataria Basin; improvements to channel banks, weirs and pumps along Bayou Lafourche; and a project to rebuild beaches, dunes and marshes near Port Fourchon.

The canal, known from its acronym as Mr. Go, is widely reviled as having accelerated marsh loss along its length, and some in Louisiana maintain that it was a conduit for the floodwaters that inundated New Orleans. Panel members said that this assertion could not yet be demonstrated but that it would be a mistake to reinforce the canal before the corps decides whether to decommission it, a step that is under consideration. Including Mr. Go in the first place, the panel said, "casts doubt on the rigor of the ranking and selection process" in the overall plan.

The panel said the other projects are scientifically sound as far as they go, but it estimated that in aggregate they would slow marsh loss in the state by only 20 percent. Wetland loss peaked in the early 1980's, when Louisiana lost about 40 square miles a year. By some estimates, its annual loss now is 12 to 20 square miles.

The panel's report can be ordered at [www.nationalacademies.org](http://www.nationalacademies.org).

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/11/09/AR2005110900941.html>

# Panel: Plan for Gulf Wetlands Lacking

By JOHN HEILPRIN

The Associated Press

Wednesday, November 9, 2005; 8:34 PM

WASHINGTON -- The Army Corps of Engineers and the state of Louisiana lack an overall plan for restoring coastal wetlands, a National Academy of Sciences panel said Wednesday.

"Federal, state and local officials, with the public's involvement, need to take a broader look," said Robert Dean, a University of Florida engineering professor in Gainesville who chaired a panel on the restoration efforts.

Dean said those efforts must examine "where land in coastal Louisiana should and can be restored and ... how some of the sediment-rich water of the Mississippi River should flow to achieve that."

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita destroyed about 100 square miles of environmentally significant marshes in southeastern Louisiana, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. That includes about 60 square miles of marsh torn up and submerged around New Orleans.

Before the storms, Louisiana had lost about 1,900 square miles of coastal wetlands since the 1930s. Natural causes, oil and natural gas drilling, and dams, levees and other artificial barriers in the Mississippi River have deprived the river's delta of land-forming sediment.

Federal geologists had previously estimated the coastal wetlands, which harbor fish and protect against potential storm surges, would lose about 650 square miles of marsh by 2050.

In contrast to the Geological Survey's findings, the National Academy's panel said that it's too early to gauge accurately how much wetlands loss in Louisiana is directly due to damage from Katrina and Rita.

Louisiana's Democratic governor, Kathleen Blanco, asked the academy to review projects managed by the Army Corps on the state's coast after the White House Office of Management and Budget directed the Army Corps to focus on projects easily attainable on a short-term basis.

Because of that intervention, the Army Corps limited itself to projects that are starting in the next five to 10 years. The Army Corps estimated those projects would only reduce the loss of coastal wetlands by about 20 percent a year.

Academy scientists said they agreed with plans for most of the individual restoration projects, but some promising ones were overlooked because they were longer in scope.

They criticized a \$100 million proposal to build an embankment by the river's outlet, saying that would only reduce land loss by about one-fifth of a square mile each year.

<http://msnbc.msn.com/id/9978936/>

## Louisiana wetlands efforts criticized

**National Academy of Sciences team cites rivalries, short-term view**

The Associated Press

Updated: 1:17 p.m. ET Nov. 9, 2005

WASHINGTON - The Army Corps of Engineers and state of Louisiana lack a coordinated overall plan for restoring coastal wetlands, a National Academy of Sciences panel said Wednesday.

"Conflicting stakeholder interests represent one of the greatest barriers to robust coastal restoration efforts in Louisiana," the team of scientists said in its report.

Robert Dean, a University of Florida engineering professor who chaired the panel, said that "federal, state and local officials, with the public's involvement, need to take a broader look."

Dean said those efforts must examine "where land in coastal Louisiana should and can be restored and ... how some of the sediment-rich water of the Mississippi River should flow to achieve that."

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### **Sediment is key**

Before the storms, Louisiana lost about 1,900 square miles of coastal wetlands since the 1930s. Natural causes, oil and natural gas drilling, and dams, levees and other artificial barriers in the Mississippi River have deprived the river's delta of land-forming sediment.

"The life's blood of the gulf system was the delivery of the river sediment," Dean said. For the marshes, cypress swamps and other low-lying wetlands to recover, he said, they will need to receive a natural flow of sediment and fresh water.

Federal geologists had previously estimated the coastal wetlands, which harbor fish and protect against potential storm surges, would lose about 650 square miles of marsh by 2050.

In contrast to the Geological Survey's findings, the National Academy's panel said that it's too early to gauge accurately how much wetlands loss in Louisiana is directly due to damage from Katrina and Rita.

But Dean said the storms "have in some ways sensitized" people to the need for rebuilding the coastal wetlands that play such an important role in the ecological health of the region.

### **Short vs. long-term**

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The full report is online at [www.nap.edu/catalog/11476.html](http://www.nap.edu/catalog/11476.html).

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## Report calls for a plan to restore coastal Louisiana

By LEE BOWMAN

*Scripps Howard News Service*

*November 09, 2005*

- A patchwork of federal projects to reduce the loss of coastal wetlands in Louisiana fails to support a comprehensive approach to stemming 75 years of destruction to the marshes and barrier islands that protect the mouth of the Mississippi River and New Orleans, according to a new scientific report.

More than 2,000 square miles of Louisiana's coastal wetlands have disappeared over the past century, including 100 square miles turned to open water by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Scientists have known for decades that the retreat of Louisiana's shoreline along the Gulf of Mexico was making the region more vulnerable to hurricanes. Contributing to the loss has been the rising sea level, channels cut to aid oil and gas exploration and, particularly, the building of Mississippi River levees that prevented new land from forming out of river sediments.

Over the past 15 years, state and federal agencies have spent \$264 million on restoration projects, but that's only a fraction of the \$14 billion estimate reached by wetlands experts more than a year ago.

Several larger restoration projects sponsored by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are moving toward construction, but such efforts need to be put into the context of longer-term wetlands recovery work that might take another 20 to 30 years, said the report from a committee of the National Academies National Research Council.

Specifically, the panel on Wednesday said that a detailed map of the desired future landscape of coastal Louisiana should be drawn as soon as possible to guide the selection and funding of restoration projects.

There's nothing scientifically wrong with most of the projects proposed so far, the experts said. But "there should be a map drawn that gives a vision of what coastal Louisiana should look like 10, 20, 50 years from now, a benchmark that would allow stakeholders to monitor how well the restoration work is doing," said Robert Dean, a professor of civil and coastal engineering at the University of Florida in Gainesville and chairman of the committee whose review was requested by the Corps and Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco, a Democrat.

"Federal, state and local officials, with the public's involvement, need to take a broader look at where land in coastal Louisiana should and can be restored, and at how some of the sediment-rich water of the Mississippi River should flow to achieve that," Dean added.

The one Corps project that the committee held out a caution flag on was a \$100 million proposal to build an embankment along the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, the 76-mile-long canal built in the 1960s as shortcut for shipping between New Orleans and the Gulf.

Residents and officials say the canal has hastened wetlands loss ever since it was built, and particularly helped funnel storm surge from Hurricane Katrina into St. Bernard Parish and lower New Orleans. There are heightened calls at all levels of government simply to fill in the canal rather than shore it up, which would reduce land loss by only 0.2 square miles a year, according to Corps estimates.

On the other hand, the panel suggested that speedier consideration be given to the idea of rerouting some or all of the Mississippi through a 55-mile-long new channel that would hook west from New Orleans, bringing a new infusion of sediment to wetlands on the western side of the delta.

Dan Walker, a Research Council staffer who directed the study, said civic and industry leaders in Louisiana have long broadly agreed that "the significant problem of a portion of their state washing away every year" needs to be addressed, but that interests may conflict when projects are proposed that might cut off some areas and save others.

"It's unlikely that the entire coast can be restored, but there has to be a more strategic approach that takes into account critical infrastructure as well as the cultural interests of the state," said Jeffrey Benoit, a former federal wetlands scientist and now a private consultant who also served on the committee.

On the Net: [www.nas.edu](http://www.nas.edu)