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Sustainable Coastal Landscape Essential to Hurricane Protection

A working group of 19 experts has released a report concluding that, in the long term, hurricane protection in Louisiana can only be secured with a combination of levees and a sustainable coastal landscape.

Over the last two months prominent national and regional scientists and engineers organized to produce a report titled "A New Framework for Planning the Future of Coastal Louisiana after the Hurricanes of 2005". Although not an official advisory committee, the working group developed its report to inform the governmental policies and actions for recovery of regions of Louisiana affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

"We know the Corps of Engineers is working to address the challenge of public expectations and Congressional mandates to enhance hurricane protection," said Dr. Donald Boesch, President of the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science and chair of the working group. "From our perspective, this must include both levees and a sustainable coastal landscape. We hope our report provides useful analyses and perspectives to achieve this needed integration."

The experts concluded that despite land subsidence and sea-level rise the wetland-dominated coastal landscape can be sustained through this century, but it will take aggressive action and bold, not timid, steps. However, construction of a continuous storm surge barrier along the coast is incompatible with a sustainable coastal landscape in Louisiana because it could interfere with the natural processes that allow wetland to survive over centuries.

"If we have learned anything from these hurricane disasters, it's the need for integration of our objectives for flood protection, navigation, and coastal ecosystems, so that they are compatible, even complementary," said Boesch. The Corps of Engineers has typically been required to plan and fund its projects in these three areas separately. The working group's report presents a new framework for integration of these objectives.

"Under this new framework, the near-term coastal restoration projects proposed by the Corps and pending authorization by Congress should be re-evaluated," said Dr. Denise Reed of the University of New Orleans and a member of the working group. "After the hurricanes, we now need to ask what these restoration projects contribute to a sustainable coastal landscape that also provides hurricane protection. We certainly don't mean to suggest that the ecosystem plan should be postponed," said Reed, "but that Congress should grant sufficient flexibility to allow it to achieve integrated benefits."

The National Research Council recently recommended that coastal restoration should be designed around a new map of what Louisiana would realistically look like in the future. The present working group, which included the chair of the committee that produced the NRC report, elaborated further that while drawing a precise map may not be feasible, there is a need for an explicit vision of the future coastal Louisiana that incorporates long-term challenges, opportunities and goals.

“New organizational structures and procedures will be required under this new framework,” said Dr. Leonard Shabman, a Washington-based economist with Resources for the Future, who co-chaired the working group. The report suggests that the rigidity and unpredictability of the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) is an obstacle to timely and flexible implementation of an integrated management framework for the Louisiana coast. Under this process, flood protection, navigation or coastal restoration projects are separately justified and authorized. Congress passed the last WRDA in the year 2000 and has been unable to agree on a new act over the last several years.

“What this will require is programmatic authorization by Congress and a joint federal-state body to coordinate and integrate planning, decision making, implementation and evaluation,” said Shabman. To provide predictable funding streams, the working group also recommends a coastal investment corporation that has the authority to sell federally guaranteed bonds and can receive revenues from Federal appropriations, the state, offshore oil and gas revenues, and other sources.

“We hope that our report is a useful contribution to dealing with this great challenge,” said Boesch. “The senior leadership of the Corps of Engineers and the Army was very receptive in our briefings earlier this week and I look forward to similar discussions with State officials next week.”

The Working Group report is available at www.umces.edu/la-restore

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