

SHORING UP AN ERODING COAST

BY MELISSA SAVAGE

It happened again. Just after the one-year anniversary of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, residents of the Gulf Coast and those living along the Mississippi River faced another challenge. This time, it was the rising water of the Mississippi River, swelled from heavy rain.

This region has been hit hard. First, Hurricane Katrina swept in and landed a devastating blow. Five years later, the BP oil spill spread serious economic and environmental harm.

Each of these incidents expose the fragility of the ecosystem that exists throughout the Mississippi River basin and the Gulf of Mexico. Each has drawn attention to concerns that have been building for years in the region: How do we balance the region's economic needs with a desire to protect the environment?

A coalition of nature advocacy groups, ecologists, environmental groups, oil companies and state lawmakers has been meeting, studying and developing a plan to ensure the long-term viability of this region. The coalition was gathered by the America's WETLAND Foundation, a nonprofit group that has been tracking erosion along the coast of Louisiana and advocating a regional solution to the problem.

CUT OFF AND DRIED UP

Louisiana is home to 30 percent of coastal marsh land in this country, but the area has experienced 90 percent of the marsh land lost in the lower 48 states, according to the foundation. The coast is being swallowed up at an alarming rate. Estimates are, that by 2050, Louisiana's coastline will have lost 500 square miles.

This delicate ecosystem is home to migratory birds, fish and wildlife. But it is also an important area for offshore oil drilling, tourism and commercial fishing. Balancing the needs of all these elements can be a struggle.



Melissa Savage is a former NCSL staff member who tracked environmental issues.

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—VAL MARMILLION, MANAGING DIRECTOR, AMERICA’S WETLAND FOUNDATION



The challenge of managing the Mighty Mississippi is nothing new. In 1927, the river flooded 27,000 square miles in seven states and caused \$400 million in damage. In the aftermath, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers designed a system of levees to offer flood protection to homes, farms and people living in New Orleans. A key unintended consequence was that the redirection of the river cut off the wetlands from the natural process they needed to survive.

It’s no easy task to manage the water flow and limit the risk of flooding homes and businesses while encouraging the area to do what it does naturally—provide flood protection. Environmentalists argue the marshland is capable of providing natural flood control. But as it continues to shrink, this capability also diminishes.

DELTA DIALOG

America’s WETLAND Foundation has gathered state legislators from the region and experts from around the world to discuss how to preserve our deltas.

The conclusion? Sediment, lots of sediment. When the Mississippi River was rising this spring, it was full of sediment. The material flowing down the river could have helped rebuild the marshland that is disappearing into the Gulf. Unfortunately, man-made flood controls have diverted the bulk of this restorative material right past the very areas that need it the most.

“The tragedy is that tons of sediment are moving past an area that’s vitally starved for it,” says Val Marmillion, managing director of the foundation. “Our country can’t plan ahead enough to realize that we can take that sediment suspended in the river and use it to build land.” Scientists estimate the recent rise of the Mississippi River could have provided immeasurable benefits to the marshland. The problem is that plans aren’t in place to ensure that the water can be used as nature intended when it rises.

The Louisiana congressional delegation has renewed efforts recently to push the federal government to open the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund to help supplement the dwindling U.S. Army Corps budget. Louisiana lawmakers argue this supplemental funding can help keep critical Mississippi River dredging projects going. The dredging helps move sediment into the areas where it is most needed.

State lawmakers from the region know it’s important to unify when they can and keep taking their message to the federal level. During the World Delta Dialogue meeting in October 2010, legislators from Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas agreed, that on issues of mutual concern, they can increase their influence if they speak as one.

Even now, as the payments from the BP oil spill start flowing into the region, decisions on how to spend that money are so politically driven that finding a solution to protecting the wetlands can be tough.

“Where do you think the ideas and stamina come from to create planning mechanisms, to call together expert testimony and to invest in the scores of demonstration projects needed to rehabilitate a failing coast?” asks King Milling, chairman of the America’s WETLAND Foundation. “It’s the state legislatures who must pass budgets, direct their state agencies, and create the environmental and economic balance that works locally.”

