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Gustav's Lessons for New Orleans

By Michael Grunwald, With Reporting by Steven Gray/Houma

Let's start with the good news: Hurricane Gustav was a much ballyhooed bust. It arrived in Louisiana as a relatively mild Category 2 storm, not the Category 4 nightmare forecasters had feared, and it missed New Orleans. The fatal failures of Hurricane Katrina were not repeated: levees and flood walls didn't collapse, pumps didn't break down, and most residents fled the coast before Gustav's landfall. There was much better preparation and cooperation, much less finger-pointing and obfuscating. And for all the TV footage of downed power lines and uprooted trees and windblown reporters, there were just a few reported deaths, and probably just a few billion dollars in damages.

But this is no time to declare victory. The evacuation of 2 million residents was less a triumph of coordination than a reaction to disaster; nothing says "Get out of Dodge" like the fresh memory of a city under water. It's even more jarring to watch Army Corps of Engineers officials hailing their hurricane defenses just three years after their tragic errors and warped priorities drowned New Orleans. The sad truth is that the Big Easy--while slightly less vulnerable than it was before Katrina--is still extremely vulnerable. And eventually the region will face the Big One, a storm far larger than Gustav or Katrina. "We got lucky this time," says law professor Mark Davis, director of Tulane's Institute on Water Resources Law and Policy. "I like being lucky. But at some point we have to get smart."

The brunt of the storm passed directly over the coast's best-preserved barrier island, Grand Isle, which sapped its power; Gustav also seems to have passed over another speed bump in the form of a rare swath of healthy marshes. "It's really incredible; a slight variation of the track either way could have meant six more feet of storm surge," says Louisiana State University coastal scientist Robert Twilley, who studied Gustav's track. "I hope nobody gets a false sense of security." The barrier islands that once protected New Orleans

have eroded, and most of the city's nearby marshes are gone. Every hour, Louisiana loses more than a football field's worth of the wetlands that once provided natural hurricane protection. The lesson of Gustav, in other words, is that the lessons of Katrina still apply. "Coastal restoration is one of those things politicians say, like 'I owe it all to my lovely wife,'" says Tulane law professor Oliver Houck, who has been warning about land losses for decades. "Meanwhile, we keep building up the coast, no matter how many times we get hit in the chin. At some point the American public is going to stop paying for chin surgery."

The first task will be defending New Orleans, which was betrayed during Katrina by badly designed and constructed Corps flood walls as well as by a misguided Corps navigation canal called the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, which intensified storm surges. The Corps has pledged that by 2011, the city will be safe from a 100-year storm--the level of protection that was required but never provided before Katrina. It has already repaired or improved 220 miles (350 km) of flood walls and levees and installed floodgates that during Gustav helped keep surges from Lake Pontchartrain out of the city's drainage canals. "The New Orleans area now has the best flood protection in its history," the Corps boasted.

That may be true, but it is sort of like boasting that Richard Simmons has never been more intimidating. The Corps has yet to address the city's two most vulnerable points: the Gulf Outlet, a storm-surge shotgun pointed at the city's gut; and a "funnel" at the mouth of the Industrial Canal, another little-used Corps channel. The Corps has said \$15 billion will be required to meet a 100-year safety standard; so far it has spent only about \$2 billion. "That should give you an idea of how much work there still is to do," says Garret Graves, who oversees coastal protection and restoration for Governor Bobby Jindal. And even 100-year protection may be insufficient for a low-lying city in a bowl, especially if seas keep rising and wetlands keep collapsing into the Gulf. "New Orleans still faces a higher level of risk from flooding than would be acceptable for other engineered life-protection systems," the American Society of Civil Engineers concluded in a report commissioned by the Corps. "Another Katrina-like hurricane is inevitable."

Then there's the rest of the coast, a Cajun country of farm towns, fishing villages and oil ports that are even more exposed than New Orleans. For decades, Louisiana's southern parishes have clamored for a series of gigantic levees across the coast--a kind of Great Wall of Louisiana--starting with a 72-mile (116 km) Morganza-to-the-Gulf dike for the city of Houma and some exposed bayou towns. Keith Luke rode out Gustav in his shrimp boat; his hometown of Dulac, once nestled behind cypress swamps and marshes, is now surrounded by open water. "We need levees," Luke said after the storm. "This is one bayou that's not protected ... I'm sure we're going to get our turn."

The \$900 million Morganza-to-the-Gulf levee that Congress approved last year would include Dulac, but it would also cut off 135,000 acres (55,000 hectares) of wetlands. Scientists believe it would make the coast even less safe by ravaging storm buffers, amplifying storm surges and encouraging complacency. And a preliminary Corps analysis suggests that building the levee to real 100-year standards could cost \$10.7 billion, a 1,200% increase. Before Gustav, Jindal had convened a science panel to review Morganza-to-the-Gulf, and momentum has been building for an alternative alignment that would protect Houma without cutting off wetlands. "We're still vulnerable, no question about it," says John Lopez, who designed the alternative plan for the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation. "We just have to stop making ourselves more vulnerable."

That would require a commitment to stop building new homes in harm's way and to stormproof existing homes. It would also require some honest assessments about where defense is possible and where retreat is necessary. The president of low-lying Plaquemines Parish declared after Gustav that "one home lost in Plaquemines is one home too many"--which is not a realistic standard. Politicians can make promises, but

they can't make Dulac safe. And those politicians need to focus on protection instead of pork; before Katrina, the Corps was spending more money in Louisiana than in any other state, but it was wasting most of the funds on navigation boondoggles that had nothing to do with hurricane defense. Louisiana's political establishment is pushing hard for coastal restoration, but it is also pushing for the coast-killing Morganza project as well as port deepenings and other make-work projects that benefit special interests.

The focus right now should be simple: better levees for New Orleans and real restoration of the coast. Southern Louisiana began to disappear after the Corps imprisoned the Mississippi River and converted it into a barge channel that stopped depositing sediment into its Delta; satellite images of this spring's floods showed the river wasting huge plumes of sediment out to sea, sediment that could be diverted to restore coastal marshes and rebuild barrier islands. There is already \$1 billion worth of small projects on the books to start that process, but restoration work is moving much, much more slowly than levee work, and scientists have estimated that it could cost more than \$20 billion to make a serious dent in addressing the coast's land losses. "I'm not worried about money; this country has the wealth and the capacity to do amazing things," says Davis, the former head of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana. "The resource that keeps me up at night is time. We lucked out with Gustav. But there may be fewer sands in that hourglass than we want to believe."

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