

Rebuilding coast requires hard choices

Posted by [asisco](#) November 28, 2008 15:37PM

New Orleans has always been defined in terms of place. Its proximity to the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico made it commercially and strategically essential. Its scant but important elevation and distance from the Gulf of Mexico made it not only defensible against storms and flooding but made a great city possible.



CHRIS GRANGER / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE ARCHIVE

Surrounded by disappearing land, this small patch of freshly built sediment, bottom right, is the West Bay Sediment Diversion located along the westbank of the Mississippi River about five miles above Head of Passes.

Any shot this city has at reclaiming that greatness will also have to be rooted in the realities of re-establishing a sustainable landscape for New Orleans and the surrounding communities. The key element in achieving this is the Mississippi River, or more precisely using the waters, nutrients and sediments of that river to maintain and enhance our rapidly disappearing coastal wetlands.

Everyone knows this and everyone knows this is urgent. The state knows it, the Army Corps of Engineers knows it and Congress and the White House know it. They have all said so in many ways (you can look it up). We have all said it many times and in many ways. But it isn't happening. Not even close.

Case in point: the recent decision by five federal agencies on the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act Task Force to shut down the largest coastal restoration project yet built, the West Bay Diversion, because it threatened to increase siltation at some anchorages near the mouth of the river. That won't happen in the short run thanks to a decision by the state to pay the increased cost of dredging, but that doesn't solve the problem, it just defers it.

The problem isn't just at West Bay or about a few anchorages. The problem is that despite nearly two decades of "comprehensive and integrated" coastal planning, we don't really have a coastal restoration program, and we won't have one as long as the only projects we can do are the ones that don't actually affect anyone or bump into any previously authorized projects.

If we have learned anything from the lessons of the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, years of oyster leasing conflicts and now West Bay, it is that coastal restoration comes in second to the vast array of flood control and navigation projects that have come before it.

It runs second to the generations of oil and gas projects and private development projects that are spread across our coast (usually pursuant to some governmental permit, lease or license).

Those activities are important, and they need to be fully considered in our coastal planning. But when they effectively trump what may be our last, best chance to save our coast and ourselves, then some things needs to change.

The first thing that needs to change is the idea that coastal restoration can succeed without changes in land use and our historic patterns of navigation and flood control. It can't.

Next, we need to focus less on mitigating for the impacts of coastal restoration projects and more on realizing that the coastal restoration effort is, quite simply, a massive mitigation program for the damage done by generations of navigation, flood control, oil and gas and development activity, however well intended or essential those things may have been or remain to be.

Protecting a handful of anchorages cannot be more important than restoring our coast, and by extension protecting the social, economic and ecological life of the region.

Finally, the persistent tendency of government agencies at all levels to be managers of past projects and programs instead of protectors of current and future public interest must change. This will require leadership from the top -- mayors, our governor, agency heads and even the president -- and it will require persistent pressure from the public.

We can make the changes necessary to have a more sustainable coast, efficient navigation and robust communities -- but this will only happen if it is what we concertedly work toward. We can honor our past, learn from it and build on it, but we can't be captive to it.

Until a viable coast and protected, resilient communities are our clear priorities, we will continue to work against ourselves. If that happens, it will be our future that is left stuck in the mud.

.....

Mark Davis is senior research fellow and director of the Tulane Institute on Water Resources Law and Policy at Tulane University Law School. His e-mail address is msdavis@tulane.edu.

Categories:

Comments

lenbahr says...

Speaking as someone who represented Louisiana for twelve years on the federal task force established in 1990 to oversee coastal restoration in Louisiana (the Breaux Act Task Force) Mark Davis has captured the essence of our dilemma.

Universal generic support for protecting and restoring our deltaic coast vanishes as soon