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## Waiting for the Go

*Louisiana is poised to become a leader in environmental restoration — so why aren't the state and federal governments coming up with policies and money to make it happen?*

**By Mollie Day**



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— *Cynthia Sarthou, executive director of the Gulf Restoration Network*

Louisiana is a natural laboratory for the budding coastal restoration industry. It has the technology and expertise to be a leader in a potentially global economic powerhouse. But a lack of laws, policy and money keeps the business stagnant.

"This is not rocket science, we've got everything we need to do it," says Ivor van Heerden, deputy director of LSU's hurricane center. "In Louisiana, we pioneered offshore oilrigs — we *build* offshore oilrigs — we build barges. When it comes to oil, we build everything we need. In terms of ecosystem- or landscape-scale restoration, we would be the first, and this would be technology that we could export all over the world."

But not until the state and federal governments set the stage for progress.

"There is a lot of work to be done here in Louisiana," says Denise Reed, a geology professor at the University of New Orleans (UNO) who is involved in several aspects of coastal restoration. "There's design to be done and dirt to be moved. On the technical side, we can handle it.

"We're training students in 21st-century skills. We know that sea level is going to rise. We know

climate change is here. We know things are going to be different in the 21st century. It's the kind of thing [members of the university community] think about all the time and can help incorporate into projects. We have a lot of resources; we need to use them."

So far, Reed says, state and federal agencies utilize university resources in an "ad hoc" way. "We don't have a system for engaging the expertise we have," she says.

In the past, the state has taken a piecemeal approach to handling most aspects of coastal restoration, but the Integrated Ecosystem Restoration and Hurricane Protection: Louisiana's Comprehensive Master Plan aims to broaden that approach. The Master Plan, which takes into account the opinions of multiple state, federal, private and other interests, is the state's blueprint for hurricane protection and coastal restoration.

Governor Bobby Jindal signed an executive order in January requiring all state agencies to comply with the Master Plan, but state and federal policies and laws that would give the plan teeth and provide the standards necessary for projects to move forward are still missing. One of the major holdups is a lack of funding.

"It's as if (President) John Kennedy had said, 'Let's go to the moon,' and then not gotten around to deciding if we should go in an airplane or a rocket or a balloon," says Mark Davis, founding director of the Tulane Institute on Water Resources Law and Policy and former director of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana. "Gobs of money are going to be spent here. The real question is: on what?"

"It's a mystery that has been pulling at national and international firms that really do see [coastal restoration] as the next big thing in public works. It's not just building projects, it is the development of building codes and land-use plans that will tell people what they need to build."

After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the state enacted a law requiring international building codes for certain residential and commercial buildings. It's unknown how rigorously the codes will be enforced and what products and standards will be designed to meet those codes. Davis says another big question is how committed to coastal restoration the state and federal governments are in terms of both enforcing policies and providing money to get the job done right.

"Industries develop around a long-term commitment," he says. "We are not going to see the level of expertise that other cities see until we make a commitment to a sustainable, vibrant coast and a sustainable, vibrant community."

"We need money now, so we can move forward much more quickly," says Sydney Coffee, former chair of Louisiana's Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) and present spokeswoman for America's Energy Coast (AEC). The four-state, nonpartisan coalition seeks federal funding and policy changes to address the threats facing the Gulf region. It unites an unlikely coalition of oil-and-gas industry representatives, scientists and environmentalists from four oil-producing Gulf States into a larger political power.

"You can't push forward on certain parts of this until you've got everyone at the table," Coffee says.

Even with all these pieces in place, aggressive coastal restoration cannot build momentum without help from the federal government. Thus far, the feds have not given Louisiana the necessary funding, estimated to be tens of billions of dollars.

"Usually, when push comes to shove, it's about a bill being passed," says Val Marmillion, managing

director of America's WETLAND Foundation, which created the AEC in 2007. The AEC will head to Washington, D.C., next month with an action plan in hand and a mission to win national support for coastal restoration. Marmillion says the AEC will be "floating some solutions" and hopes the federal government will react favorably to them.

LSU's van Heerden says that during a reception at the White House before the November victory of President-elect Barack Obama, Sen. John Kerry told him Louisiana's biggest hurdle was President George Bush's administration.

"They haven't given the money up; they've made lots of empty promises," van Heerden says. "Many of them realize that the problem in coastal Louisiana is poverty. John Kerry said that if we elect a Democratic president, we will be very pleased in terms of the government pouring money into Louisiana to try and sort out the problems.

'We're not important to Bush. On the first anniversary of Katrina, he came to Louisiana and did a ribbon cutting at a hardware store instead of doing a ribbon cutting on a levee system. There were many times he would give a speech on Louisiana and would talk about "Those people in that part of the world,' as if we're not part of America."

Those working on the problem say it may be difficult for Louisiana to win the nation's trust when it comes to spending federal tax dollars, especially in light of demands for massive infusions of cash to bail out failing financial institutions and, more recently, America's automobile industry.



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"It's not a national priority here," says Tulane's Davis. "It's a national commitment in the Netherlands," where 60 percent of the country lies below sea level. The Dutch government developed unparalleled levee standards and built protection against 10,000- and 100,000-year storms.

That's not likely to happen here. Even with a strong commitment from the state, it is feared federal bureaucracy could severely retard the progress of coastal rebuilding: The hurricane levee system authorized for Louisiana in 1965 was not complete in 2005, when Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit.

Critics say the Corps of Engineers is using processes under the Water Resource Development Act (WRDA) that cannot be implemented quickly enough to restore Louisiana's dwindling coastline.

WRDA's main purpose is to authorize the Corps to undertake projects that reduce the threat of

flooding from storms, improve navigation and ameliorate damage to the environment. Under WRDA guidelines, the Corps must investigate not only what is needed in one region but also whether that program is in the best interest of the nation. Even after a project is authorized, funds may not be appropriated immediately. To make things more complicated, national priorities (and administrations) can change during the lengthy process.

Troy Constance, chief of the Corps' restoration branch for the New Orleans district, says the Corps is looking at policy and "actively pursuing" ways to streamline the process.

David Miller, director of implementation for the CPRA, says the Corps' process takes too long, and in the end, federal funding is not guaranteed. "We are keeping the Corps involved, but we are moving ahead of them because we simply can't wait," Miller says. "Ultimately we hope they do get federal dollars that they will contribute."

The federally funded Corps is requiring Louisiana to pay for its share of restoration costs before it will commence studies and levee projects.

"We are working diligently with the state to move forward," Constance says. "Once that's done, you should see a surge forward with coastal plans."

While the Corps undoubtedly will be a big player in the restoration industry, the dance between state and federal governments is necessarily being re-choreographed since the evocation of the state's Master Plan.

Speaking for the Corps, Tom Podany, chief of the Corps' New Orleans Protection and Restoration Office, says the Master Plan is "fully integrated with the coastal restoration work the Corps is doing now. It's been the source of a lot of the ideas and concepts that are in the pipeline."

Experts familiar with the process say a scientifically justifiable plan is necessary to obtain substantial federal funding for Louisiana's coastal restoration industry, but while the state's Master Plan is scientifically based, it does not directly appeal to the federal government. In addition, a conflict of interest between development and restoration concerns remains a challenge for the state.

Louisiana's Department of Natural Resources (DNR) oversees the applications for both coastal restoration and development projects. Environmentalists argue that housing development on flood plains and industries' use of fragile wetlands work against natural hydrologic processes and coastal restoration efforts. The state's Master Plan does not prohibit such development.

Before any development projects can begin in a coastal zone, the state and Corps must approve a Coastal Use permit. From 1980 to 2008, more than 3,000 Coastal Use permits were filed — largely by the oil-and-gas industry — in St. Mary Parish alone.

Jim Rives, administrator of the DNR's Coastal Management Division, says as many as 1,900 Coastal Use permits are issued every year, compared to 600 or 700 federal consistency reviews, of which only a percentage pertain to coastal restoration projects.

"The state and the Corps have failed to take on their responsibility to preserve what's still here," says Cynthia Sarthou, executive director of the Gulf Restoration Network. "We are not taking an aggressive stance to stop development in fragile areas. At some point, the state is going to have to take a hard stance."

Louis E. Buatt, assistant secretary of the DNR's Office of Coastal Restoration, says his department

hopes to alleviate "net impact" by considering Jindal's executive order in all of its permitting decisions. The DNR has hired consultants to develop a guidance document that will help ensure compliance with the state plan. Because of Louisiana's extremely high rate of coastal erosion, it remains to be seen whether or not mitigation efforts can keep up with the number of projects the state approves each year.

UNO's Reed says the school is gearing up for the task of reviving the state's coastline, and has lots of resources to offer the state. For example, UNO is a leader in satellite mapping technology and modeling systems for changing water conditions along the coast. Reed anticipates coordinated efforts between state and university systems will emerge as the restoration industry grows, enabling more efficient use of university research and resources, providing jobs for graduates and giving the state economic benefits from a new and thriving industry.

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