

FIELD HEARING - Five Years Later: Lessons Learned, Progress Made, and Work Remaining from Hurricane Katrina – Chalmette Field Hearing
Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery – Mark Schexnayder 08/26/2010

Outline of testimony:

Gulf States account for 32 – 41% on average of commercial fishing production of the lower 48 States.

Louisiana has approximately 75% of the yearly Gulf landings.

Over 95% of the gulf commercial landings are estuarine (wetland) dependent for some part of their life.

Louisiana had 217 square miles of wetland converted to open water just during Katrina/Rita

Over 1900 square miles lost over the last century to hydrologic modification, nutrient and sediment starvation and subsidence.

Everyone on the Gulf Coast appreciates the workers and administrators of the USACE, FEMA and all the agencies and organizations. I'd like to use my 5 minutes to look back on what went right and wrong in fisheries recovery and coastal protection/restoration and hopefully help ourselves and others avoid the same mistakes that hindsight now clearly shows us. If it is not, I'll do it anyway.

Fisheries Infrastructure:

Every major fishing community on the Mississippi River and east was utterly demolished by Katrina, and many re-flooded three weeks late by Rita. Total losses of fisheries infrastructure was estimated to be near \$582 Million for both storms and included commercial, recreational and damage to the charter boat industries. Most areas are still recovering, some much faster than others. The loss of these vessels, docks, boatyards, etc. stopped the flow of income into these communities and prevented them from helping themselves recover. The catastrophic engineering failure of the interior levee systems of New Orleans also greatly decreased the local ability to help these coastal communities.

Shortly after the storm, a Coalition of Louisiana Seafood Industry leaders and Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Louisiana Seafood Promotion and Marketing Board, LSU AgCenter/Sea Grant met to devise plans to move forward. The Federal and State agencies initiated the largest marine clean up in history. Fishing vessels, houses and docks were turned into debris and clogged waterways, sometimes for years. Lack of public staging areas hindered

recovery of the over 2000 commercial and 17,000 recreational vessels that were stranded on roads, levees and fields.

The Louisiana Recovery Authority, working together with the Seafood Coalition, formulated a grant program for Parishes to establish publicly owned marinas. Criteria for selection were based on resiliency, stronger built and public ownership. These last criteria will make these facilities “PW eligible”, but more importantly have sites along the coast where vessels can be brought for repair. While some Parishes like Plaquemines and Jefferson were successful putting together proposals and funding to rebuild public marinas such as in Venice and Bucktown, other Parishes were dealing with so much destruction that such projects are still on the drawing board. Unfortunately, if a major storm hit lower St. Bernard next week, we would be facing the same challenges to find vessel recovery areas as before Katrina.

The tale of three States: Marine Debris

Big issues for us still eligibility criteria. It is a constant fight over what we need to establish eligibility over navigation streams. 30 or so remaining state water bottoms state sponsored and over 100 locally sponsored areas. One of the major stumbling blocks has been the FEMA imposed height requirement in Louisiana, a measure that was not applied in Alabama (Ivan and Katrina), Mississippi (Katrina) or Texas (Ike). In those states, water bottoms cleaned there without a height eligibility requirement, where as in Louisiana 2 feet below the average draft of vessels bottom minimum was applied. We need a consistent policy for all states. Stafford Act reform?

Coastal Land loss/Restoration:

Louisiana lost approximately 217 square miles of vegetated wetlands that were converted to open water. These areas were some of the richest fisheries and wildlife habitat and also served as a storm buffer. We need them back.

Mitigation of Flood Protection Environmental Damage:

Shortly after the storm, the decision was made NOT to take any borrow material from any wetland areas. While this may have sounded good during the time, the result was that no “on sight mitigation”, near the levees, was accomplished. Material had to be double handled and transported at great expense of time and money. Impacted hydrology in places like Bayou Sauvage could have been by locating bar pits in the refuge. This would have saved lots of transportation and acquisition costs but more importantly allowed these areas to become new avenues for now impeded water flow. Mitigation would have been done immediately where damage was done, faster and more efficiently and cheaper instead of the less than perfect system we are working with still today, 5 years later.

Where is the Urgency for Coastal Restoration?

The tremendous "design built" lessons of a billion dollar flood gate in New Orleans east and largest in the world pump station/gate on the west bank need to be brought into the world of coastal wetland rebuilding. I lost the napkin Sue Hawes drew a simple picture of how to start the MRGO restoration project quickly. "Pump sediment from the river and just start filling in these big ponds in the central wetlands" she said. "Do this while you are designing the rest of the project. You know you will need the material, and you will learn how it works at the same time." Sue was right. Today we still wait for the final plans, then authorization, then funding...

The catastrophic damage visited on SE Louisiana was a large part the "chickens coming home to roost". Have we gotten the "lesson learned" of the 100 or so years of unmitigated damages coastal Louisiana has suffered for the good of the nation in the form of navigation "improvements", the establishment of deep water port that has provided trillions of dollars of benefit for grain and coal export and import of countless goods. Damages by past oil and gas exploration and pipelines that shredded our coast with 10,000 miles of access canals and hydrology altering spoil banks. Yes, Louisiana has benefited also, but at the end of the day we all paid and continue to pay for these oversights.

Over \$14 billion dollars have been allocated and invested in rebuilding levee's, new floodgates, pump stations, etc. The USACE has treated this new work as a "system" where everything works together. Unfortunately, the coastal geography has been largely left out of this mix. The State of Louisiana has gone to great pains to align its agencies to deal with both issues as one. It has formed the Office of Coastal Protection and Restoration (LCPR) and reformed its local Flood protection authorities and vested them with coastal restoration powers. The State has a plan to restore coastal areas that have broad local support. What has been lacking is a steady funding mechanism of the magnitude to achieve results equal to the forces of erosion that have caused us to loss over 2000 square miles, more land loss than some entire states have. We have the greatest tool we need in the Mississippi River and yet every day, the sediment we need in the wetlands is still lost off of the Continental Shelf.