

5.0 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Public involvement has been a critical component in the LCA study process and the development of the recommended LCA Plan. This section summarizes the public participation efforts during the LCA study process, and identifies future opportunities for public involvement and input as LCA Plan formulation transitions into plan implementation. Full documentation and discussion of public involvement and outreach efforts are included in the PEIS.

While the first official public meetings under the LCA Study occurred in April 2002, relevant public involvement and input regarding the study began in the late 1990s during the development of the Coast 2050 Plan. The extensive public participation and input during the development of that consensus-based report generated a coast wide vision for restoration efforts and identified numerous restoration strategies and specific restoration projects. The vision and strategies in the Coast 2050 Plan served as the basis for the 905 (b) reconnaissance report.

5.2 PHASED PUBLIC PARTICIPATION MEETINGS

Throughout public participation efforts in the LCA study process, the USACE and LDNR sought input from individuals, private entities, local governments, academia, and state and Federal agencies, in addition to other stakeholders such as environmental, navigation, commercial fishing, recreation, agricultural, and oil and gas interests. Meetings were held throughout the coastal region as well as in Texas, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Furthermore, the USACE and LDNR kept the public informed throughout the study process through the use of web sites, print and broadcast media, and radio interviews. Stakeholder groups, such as the Governor's Advisory Commission on Coastal Restoration and Conservation, also helped by keeping their constituents aware of changes or new developments during the study process.

The LCA Study included four sets of public participation meetings, two sets of public scoping meetings associated with the PEIS, and a series of USACE/LDNR-sponsored stakeholder meetings. The subject matter and date for each set of meetings held are as follows:

- Initial Scoping for LCA Study and PEIS – April 2002
- Update on Status of the LCA Study Process and Plan Formulation – February 2003
- LCA Subprovince Alternatives – May/June 2003
- Stakeholder Roundtable Discussions – July/August 2003
- Final Array of Alternative LCA Plans – August 2003
- Scoping for LCA Plan and PEIS – April/May 2004
- LCA Near Term Plan and Draft PEIS – July/August 2004

At each of the public participation meetings, the USACE sought to solicit public input on issues being addressed in the various phases of plan formulation. As part of that effort,

background materials were provided to the public on a variety of issues. Materials to assist with various public participation activities included:

- Fact sheet on LCA Study and Coast 2050
- Fact sheet on Evolution of Coastal Restoration in Louisiana
- Fact sheet on Large-Scale Studies
- LCA Near-Term Sorting and Critical Needs Criteria Definitions
- LCA Study Public Involvement Fact Sheet
- Fact sheet on roles of various agencies/organizations
- Fact sheet on timeline, milestones, key decision points
- Fact sheet on sources of additional information (web site addresses, agency contacts, document titles, etc.)
- Brochure on Overview of the LCA Ecosystem Restoration Study Tentatively Selected Plan
- PowerPoint presentations
- Calendar of events/meetings
- Frequently Asked Questions
- Exhibits

The USACE employed several methods to facilitate input at public meetings. In all instances, the public was encouraged to provide written and oral comment on the particular study focus for each meeting through comment cards and through traditional public comment. In addition, USACE and LDNR representatives were present at each meeting to solicit input from individuals who preferred a one-on-one setting during "open-house" sessions. Some meetings provided the public an opportunity to become more intensively involved with plan formulation through the use of breakout sessions and worksheets. At each breakout session, individuals assembled into small groups and had the opportunity to express their concerns on a more individual and interactive level with study team members and other participants.

Using public input gathered from the April 2002 scoping meetings, the February and May/June 2003 public participation meetings, and the July/August 2003 stakeholder meetings, the PDT refined coast wide restoration strategies of plan alternatives and identified potential large-scale restoration concepts for inclusion in LCA Plan alternatives. For example, public comments identified a need to address freshwater management and allocation in the Chenier Plain as part of the LCA restoration effort. As a result of this input, the USACE included this restoration concept for evaluation in plan formulation, and ultimately recommended the inclusion of the Chenier Plain Freshwater Management and Allocation Reassessment Study as part of the LCA Plan.

In February 2004, study efforts were refocused to address critical ecosystem needs that require immediate attention over the next decade. At the April 2004 scoping meetings, the public was provided the opportunity to comment on the identification of sorting and critical needs criteria and to provide comment on the application of those criteria to the 79 restoration features identified in Phase V of plan formulation, described in section 3.3 PLAN FORMULATION.

In July and August 2004, the USACE conducted public meetings to solicit input on the draft LCA Plan, including comments on the recommended program components (e.g., near-term priority projects, large-scale studies, demonstration projects, etc.), as well as the recommended plan implementation procedures.

5.3 FUTURE PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Continued public participation will be a vital part of the efforts to refine, authorize, and ultimately implement the LCA Ecosystem Restoration Study, just as it has been at every step in the history of the endeavor to secure a sustainable future for coastal Louisiana.

Because of the scale and unprecedented nature of this undertaking, the formulation of a public participation plan must be characterized by a sense of urgency, purpose, and flexibility. In the context of the LCA Ecosystem Restoration Study, public participation must be understood to be more than a public information program or a public comment vehicle, though surely it includes those aspects. Rather, public participation is an integral part of plan formulation, project development, program implementation, and monitoring and evaluation.

As the LCA Ecosystem Restoration Study transitions from plan formulation to plan implementation, there will be future opportunities for public participation and input. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in USACE Restoration Activities provides for an early and open public process, called “scoping,” for determining the scope of issues, resources, impacts, and alternatives to be addressed in draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). NEPA requirements will be addressed in all future planning and study efforts relative to the various aspects of the LCA Study for the next 10 years. Specific features associated with each LCA Ecosystem Restoration Study will include an EIS. Release of each study for public review and comments will comply with NEPA. The study will go above and beyond those requirements when and where appropriate.

During periods while not officially engaged in public or scoping meetings, the USACE, in coordination with the State of Louisiana, would keep open the lines of communication through web site interaction, speaking engagements, workshops, news releases, timeline awareness, frequently asked questions, fact sheets, and talking points. To that end, a Strategic Communications Plan would be established that clearly defines a proactive, consistent, and cohesive procedure for informing the public of the LCA study process.

The LCA team is currently funding a contract to produce a popular booklet, traveling exhibit, brochure and a PowerPoint presentation geared to a popular audience. Future public involvement initiatives include forming proactive partnerships with communities, providing information and interactive CDs to schools and libraries, hosting teacher workshops, and creating interpretive exhibits for local festivals, museums and visitor centers.

The following are additional objectives for the future LCA Public Involvement Plan:

Embedded Media: Major state newspaper reporters will be invited to spend two weeks each working and reporting from the collocated PDT office.

Exhibits: Portable exhibits are available, and others planned, for use at numerous exhibit opportunities around the state and Nationwide through conference participation.

Speakers Bureau: LCA Comprehensive Study team members will participate in an active Speakers Bureau program.

Outreach Tactics: The tools listed below are instrumental in educating the public (at a local and National level), an advantage that provides them the opportunity to fully engage in the study process (for example, determining the scope of issues, resources, impacts, and alternatives to be addressed for each individual project proposed for the next 10 years). The tools would provide a mechanism for the public to know, at any given time, the status of each study, from a science and technology standpoint (the uncertainties, research efforts underway), to the progress on the EIS, engineering and design, implementation and construction. All handouts would be posted in a consistent site on the web at www.lca.gov.

- Fact sheet of Frequently Asked Questions
- Fact sheet/brochure on LCA
- Fact sheet on roles of various agencies/organizations
- Fact sheet on timeline, milestones, key decision points
- Fact sheet on sources of additional information
- PowerPoint presentations geared toward multiple target audiences
- Calendar of events/meetings
- Newsletter – provide quarterly updates on study and construction
- Comment cards
- Host regularly occurring meetings with non-government agencies who act as a conduit to a larger audience.
- Contracts to develop a media writer and campaign
- Public radio announcements
- Engage focus groups
- Measure public knowledge through Department of Defense approved survey
- Exhibit or oral presence at National conferences
- Produce educational 10-minute animated videos

5.4 AREAS OF CONTROVERSY AND UNRESOLVED ISSUES

1. Conflict concerning the operation of the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO).

The Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO), a channel connecting the Gulf of Mexico to the City of New Orleans, was completed in 1965 to provide a shorter, safer, and more efficient passage to New Orleans that would simultaneously boost the economy of St. Bernard Parish. Since the construction and operation of the MRGO land loss, soil erosion, habitat modification, and wildlife and fisheries losses have occurred in the surrounding area. Concerned citizens

propose to “close” the MRGO, which would prohibit oceanic vessels with a draft of more than 12 feet from utilizing the canal. Along with eliminating deep draft vessels, the initial proposals call for water control structures including floodgates, locks, weirs and sills to be strategically built along the MRGO. The goal of these structures is to reduce water influx into the marshes and bayous from the MRGO channel, thus reducing the potential for storm surges and saltwater intrusion. Navigation stakeholders do not necessarily oppose the closure of the MRGO; however, they believe closure should be synchronized with construction of a new lock at the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal (IHNC) so commerce will not be disrupted. To resolve this conflict, the USACE/MVN is currently performing an economic analysis of the channel’s efficiency. Residents are very concerned that this study will not lead to closure or significant modification of the MRGO.

2. Public concern that litigation from parties negatively impacted by restoration projects will make restoration prohibitively expensive.

Elements of the public expressed concern that restoration efforts, particularly projects that would involve freshwater diversions, would affect existing oyster beds via lowering salinity levels, thereby creating a situation where excessive compensation for potentially affected oyster leases would be necessary. As noted in Chapter 4 of the LCA main report, if oyster leases will be adversely impacted by a project, then such leases will be acquired and just compensation will be made. It is anticipated that this will reduce the potential liabilities in the future.

3. Concern about the priority of certain restoration projects.

- *Demand by Terrebonne and Barataria Basin residents for the immediate restoration of the Barataria-Terrebonne Estuary before other regions of the coastal ecosystem.*

Many residents of Terrebonne and Barataria Basins have expressed scoping concerns that this area has suffered the greatest land lost and ecological degradation and therefore should have immediate restoration efforts directed to address these problems. The Terrebonne and Barataria Basins are losing coastal wetlands more rapidly than anywhere else in Louisiana. Since these basins are in such dire need, there is strong public sentiment that these areas should be addressed first. Projects with considerable public support include the Bayou Lafourche reintroduction and the Third Delta Conveyance channel.

- *Public support for the construction of restoration projects in areas that will maximize the benefits to society, culture, and the regional economy.*

Nearly 2 million Louisiana residents live in the coastal zone, and the culture and socioeconomic structure of the population has evolved to depend on the presence and productivity of the wetlands. In general, the public is supportive of coastal restoration, but request project construction in areas that will maximize the benefit to Louisiana citizens. Restoration projects that will prevent flooding, storm surge, infrastructure damage, property damage, and damage to commercial and recreational fisheries are most desirable. In addition, the public wants restoration projects to coordinate with flood control projects, navigation

activities, and other activities that preserve the local economy. Projects in isolated areas, with limited direct benefit for Louisiana residents are generally not supported by the public.

- *Public concern for additional salinity controls in the Chenier Plain and inclusion of additional restoration features for this subprovince in the implemented LCA Plan.*

Because of its distance from a major river, restoration opportunities in the Chenier Plain are hampered by the limited availability of "excess" freshwater and sediment. Thus, restoration projects constructed in this subprovince have attempted to capitalize on this limited excess freshwater through salinity control and hydrologic restoration measures. There is a great deal of public support for continued construction of such projects, as the belief is that they are effective means of combating saltwater intrusion and land loss in this region. However, members of the National Technical Review Committee (NTRC) as well as many other researchers and managers are concerned that such measures do not fully address the problem, and will not provide long-term sustainability in this region. Data indicate that the excess freshwater is very limited and is not available at times of the year when salinities are highest. Additionally, subsidence is not sufficiently offset using these measures, as they provide for very limited sediment redistribution. Fisheries access within and through this region is also hampered by the construction of these structures, creating another stress on valuable natural resources. To resolve this issue, the LCA Plan includes the Chenier Plain Freshwater and Sediment Management and Allocation Reassessment Study, in order to provide managers with the information needed to formulate the best restoration plan for Subprovince 4.

4. Concern with inaction and perceived lack of urgency with respect to restoration.

- *Public support for comprehensive, long-term restoration efforts beyond near-term restoration efforts.*

Members of the public expressed concern that the restoration of the Louisiana coastal ecosystem must include a long-term, comprehensive approach and commitment to significantly reverse the current trend of land loss and ecosystem degradation. While many members of the public acknowledged the need for a "near-term" effort, as embodied by the proposed LCA Plan, the majority viewed such an effort only as the initial step of the overall Louisiana coastal ecosystem restoration effort. Although the model results indicate that the LCA Plan would offset roughly 70 percent of the projected land loss in the future significant need still exists to offset the past loss of approximately 1.2 million acres and subsequent reduction in overall ecosystem quality.

Through meetings, the public has been informed of Federal guidance to focus on near-term restoration measures. The public was involved in the formulation of a comprehensive long-term restoration program and is certain a comprehensive program is the key to successful restoration. Many projects with considerable public support, including the restoration of the Bayou Chevreuil reef and additional salinity controls and other features in the Chenier Plain cannot be implemented in the near-term. However, the public feels these projects are essential to the restoration of coastal Louisiana; and consequently, they request a substantial long-term commitment from the Federal Government.

- *Public demand for the immediate construction of restoration actions versus requirements for conducting additional study of restoration problems.*

Members of the public expressed concern that the LCA Program's restoration effort will focus on the need for more studies rather than construction, operation and maintenance of restoration projects. In addition, it was expressed that immediate action should be taken to address Louisiana coastal ecosystem degradation issues, and that there are enough existing studies of the problem to warrant and justify that immediate action.

5. Concern about the necessity for sediment and water quality testing for each restoration feature.

Restoration measures call for riverine water and sediment to be redistributed into the surrounding coastal ecosystem. However, there is concern that these resources are sufficiently contaminated with nutrients and toxins such as mercury that restoration actions may intensify problems associated with eutrophication within the receiving areas, or compromise human health through consumption of contaminated fish and shellfish. Therefore, environmental groups have requested that sediment and water quality testing become a routine part of the project planning, engineering, and design phase. The Federal planning process requires that sediment and water quality be evaluated prior to implementation. If an issue arises during the evaluation, it will be addressed in a manner that is consistent with policy set by such acts as National Environmental Policy Act and Clean Water Act.

6. Conflicts may result when balancing economic interests with coastal restoration, especially when multiple stakeholders share common coastal resources.

- *Public concern that diversions will over-freshen receiving basins and concern that diversions could create widespread algae blooms in interior bays and lakes.*

Although there are many proponents of freshwater and sediment diversions, some members of the public are concerned about possible unintended consequences of implementing this type of restoration feature. Commercial and recreational fishermen are concerned that the change in the salinity regime often associated with a freshwater diversion, would cause loss or displacement of current recreational and commercially valuable fishery species. In addition to altering salinity, diversions may increase the amount of nutrients supplied to lakes and bays. Increased nutrients create the possibility of algal blooms, which are potentially detrimental to many aquatic organisms including fish, shellfish, and invertebrates, and may contribute to formation of hypoxic zones.

- *Concern with changing the existing operational scheme of the Old River Control Structure in regulating river flows in the Mississippi and Atchafalaya Rivers.*

Alterations in the operation of the Old River Control structure could increase sediment and freshwater in certain areas. The same concerns exist as with diversions. Change in the salinity regime often associated with a freshwater diversion, would cause loss of current

recreational and commercially valuable fishery species. In addition to altering salinity, the features may increase the amount of nutrients supplied to a wetland. Increased nutrients create the possibility of algal blooms, which are potentially detrimental to many aquatic organisms including fish, shellfish, and invertebrates.

- *Concern that LCA Plan restoration features in Subprovince 3 would excessive amounts of water and sediment into the area.*

Overall, residents in Subprovince 3 are supportive of the proposed restoration features, however some citizens are concerned that an overabundance of water and sediment would result if the features are implemented. Concern is based on the thought that an excess of water and sediment could potentially displace many aquatic organisms, including fish, shellfish, and invertebrates. Additional concerns were raised that these sediments would accelerate infilling of the Atchafalaya Basin.

- *Real property rights issues including public access, mineral rights, and the perception that Federal monies would be spent to restore private properties.*

There are differing opinions regarding public access to restored areas and the extent to which mineral rights should be restricted within project areas. Also, some elements of the public are concerned that public monies will be used to benefit private land. Additional concerns were raised by private landowners that new rights for public access should not be created if private lands benefit from expenditures of public funds.

- *Concern with impediments to navigation and proposed re-routing of the Mississippi River and the Atchafalaya River Navigation channels.*

Members of the public, including Navigation interests, expressed concern that proposals to re-route portions of the Mississippi River and the Atchafalaya River Navigation channels could result in delays and restricted access, which could interrupt the transport of goods and commodities into and out of various ports in the Louisiana coastal area.

- *The effect of coastal restoration on flood control projects.*

Some members of the public are concerned that funding coastal restoration projects will reduce available funding for vital flood protection projects. Although the LCA program intends to be a complement, not a substitute, for flood protection projects, Federal funding shortages are a concern with any large-scale project.