

## **COASTAL RESTORATION—THE INVESTMENT WE CANNOT AFFORD NOT TO MAKE**

Mark Davis

Executive Director, Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana

200 Lafayette Street, Suite 500

Baton Rouge, Louisiana (phone 225-344-6555; fax 225-344-0590; markd@crcl.org)

Louisiana and this nation are facing a crisis. Despite the best efforts that have been marshalled to date, coastal Louisiana is still disappearing at an alarming rate of more than 25 square miles each year. Without bold, decisive action Louisiana as we now know it--geographically, culturally, and economically may cease to exist in the next 50-100 years. The resulting loss would be incalculable and would be compounded by the fact that it did not have to be. If the unthinkable should occur it would not be because we were overtaken by events, but because we did not rise to the challenge when there was still time.

There is still time to act but it is running frighteningly short.

Hurricane Georges and our ongoing drought have made it ever clearer that our coastal crisis is not merely “an environmental” problem. Coastal collapse robs us of tax base, storm protection, private land rights, wildlife and fisheries habitat, dependable freshwater supplies for drinking and industrial use. Increasingly business and community leaders in the private sector are recognizing they are at risk. Banks, utilities, insurance companies and others are joining with the traditional coastal constituencies to say that if we do not recognize the role our coastal wetlands, waters, and barrier shorelines play in providing for and protecting our communities, culture, and economy then we cannot adequately justify the investment that will be needed to save our coast.

Indeed, the bottom line question is not whether we can afford the projected \$14 billion price tag of implementing the Coast 2050 plan over the next 20 years, but whether we can afford not to make the investment. Can we afford the increased storm risks to our communities and the costs of protecting them? Can we afford higher insurance rates or the prospect that many communities and business will find themselves uninsurable? Can we afford to lose the billions of dollars of oil and gas and transportation infrastructure that is at risk? Can we afford to lose a multi-billion dollar a year fishery or the very natural resources that define our communities and draw billions of tourism dollars to this state each year? The answer to these questions must be of course not.

Yet without a definite decision to take the lead in implementing Coast 2050 our answer will be in effect "yes". This is the time for a new understanding of what coastal restoration is all about. This is the time for a new commitment to the stewardship of our coast. This is the time for leadership.

We believe there are three key elements of this “new understanding” and “new commitment”:

- 1) We must understand the consequences of failing to act.
- 2) We must have a vision of a “restored” coast and a plan for achieving that vision. The State/Federal

Coast 2050 plan is the best expression of this vision and it should be pursued and refined.

- 3) We must make commitments to:
  - a. Sound management
  - b. Public accountability
  - c. Adequate funding
  - d. Leadership by the State of Louisiana

Ultimately, the third element is the most crucial. In the more than 15 years that we have been working on coastal issues the most fundamental lesson we have learned is that if we--the State of Louisiana--do not take the lead, if we do not demonstrate that we take our coastal crisis seriously then no one else will do it for us. The rest of this nation will not act if we won't.

We cannot afford to wait for the rest of the nation to wake up to our problem before we stir ourselves. We can and must make our case and lead by example. That means this legislature, our Governor, and the sundry constituencies in this state need to pull together to find a way to fulfill and expand the promise of the Coast 2050 plan.

In the near term that would entail several specific steps:

1. Reform state laws and policies that impede or drive up the cost of coastal restoration projects. Presently this state does not know what lands and waters it owns and, according to recent court decision, does not even have the right to cancel or amend oyster leases in areas that will be affected by restoration projects.
2. Develop the technical support to better evaluate, design, and monitor coastal projects.
3. Require that all state programs and resources be better coordinated and prioritized to maximize efficiency and accountability and to lessen the likelihood that we are putting people and infrastructure in harms way or working at counter purposes.
4. Undertake to better ascertain the economic implications of coastal land loss. As long as coastal restoration work is viewed as an environmental program and not as a broad survival campaign, we are destined to fail.