



Major coastal restoration financing starts, slowly, in Barack Obama's 2011 budget plan

By Mark Schleifstein, The Times-Picayune
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The biggest chunk of the Louisiana Coastal Area money is expected to be spent on building wetlands with material dredged from the Mississippi River during routine maintenance dredging. The dredge Borinquen was photographed on the Mississippi River in October, near the entrance to the Harvey Lock.

President Barack Obama's proposed fiscal year 2011 budget includes the first \$35.6 million for the Army Corps of Engineers to construct larger coastal Louisiana restoration projects, but falls far short of the money allocated to similar major environmental restoration projects elsewhere in the country.

For instance, the new budget would give the Environmental Protection Agency \$300 million for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and a combined \$255 million to the corps and Interior Department for South Florida ecosystem restoration efforts, including the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan.

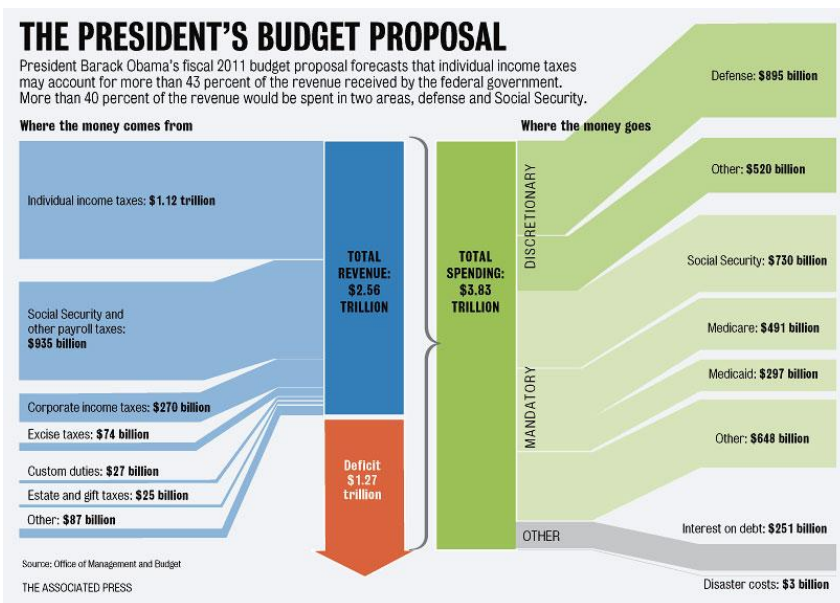
But the first-time funding for the Louisiana Coastal Area Ecosystem Restoration program is a key milestone that shows administration officials are beginning to understand the urgency of the state's restoration needs, said Garret Graves, adviser to Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal.

"The fact that coastal restoration in Louisiana is one of the only new construction projects requested by the president in the nation is a clear message that the tide is turning," Graves said. "For over 80 years, our state has lost over 2,300 square miles of coastal land; finally, the federal government can join us in implementing solutions."

Graves said the state expects to spend \$500 million of its own money in 2010 on restoration, including money from past state budget surpluses and from federal and state oil and gas revenue received by the state.

The Obama administration decision to allocate money to the Louisiana Coastal Area program was praised by a trio of national environmental groups.

"The president's proposed funding to restore this ecological treasure is a wake-up call for the nation that we are rapidly losing a region that is home to critical energy production infrastructure, the busiest port in North America, and the most valuable fishery in the Gulf of



Mexico," said a joint statement released by the Environmental Defense Fund, National Wildlife Federation and National Audubon Society. "Our nation cannot continue to ignore these vital interests."

About \$19 million of the new Louisiana Coastal Area money will pay for construction of projects whose designs are completed. The biggest chunk is expected to be

spent on building wetlands with material dredged from the Mississippi River during routine maintenance dredging operations. Some of the money may also be used for projects aimed at demonstrating the effectiveness of restoration methods or technologies, a corps spokeswoman said.

Breakdown of Obama's budget: [Click to open graphic in new window.](#)

Another \$16.5 million will pay for completion of design work on other Louisiana Coastal Area projects, with construction financed in future budgets.

The federal government will pay 65 percent of the cost of the projects, with the state paying the rest. The corps and the state still must complete cost-sharing agreements for each project.

In line with the president's cost-cutting efforts for the 2011 budget, the budget proposal for the corps' New Orleans district office, which includes the southern half of the state, totaled just over \$256 million, or about \$3 million more than 2010. As part of the federal budgeting

process, the district had told senior corps officials that it had the ability of spending \$710 million, including another \$17.5 million for Louisiana Coastal Area restoration projects.

In a Monday news conference on the corps budget, corps Commander Lt. Gen. Robert Van Antwerp said he still anticipates no need for additional money to complete work on improving the hurricane levees in the New Orleans area to protect from storm surge created by a hurricane with a 1 percent chance of occurring, a so-called 100-year hurricane.

The Obama budget also includes money in other department budgets for coastal restoration efforts, which Graves and environmental groups also hail as recognition by Obama officials of their concerns that the corps has had too much say in the state's restoration program.

It includes \$5.75 million in the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and about \$4 million in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration budgets.

The Fish & Wildlife Service money will be used to increase the agency's scientific research to match climate change concerns with landscape-scale conservation. The service would be allocated another \$750,000 to develop a "landscape conservation cooperative" associated with the Mississippi River and the Gulf Coast.

The budget also includes \$283 million for the Department of Interior for restoration, levee and infrastructure projects to be built nationwide as part of the federal Coastal Impact Assistance Program, with the largest share of that money going to Louisiana.

That program was authorized in 2005, and uses money from oil and gas production in federal waters, including in the Gulf of Mexico off Louisiana's coast, to pay for projects developed by the state and coastal parishes and approved for construction by the federal Minerals Management Service.

The Obama budget also would set aside \$65 million for small restoration projects built under the federal-state Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act, also known as the Breaux Act, which has been in place since 1990. Most of the money will be spent on Louisiana projects.

The corps budget also includes \$5 million for the West Bank & Vicinity levee program, which will pay to raise sections of the Mississippi River levee where they tie in to the hurricane levee system in the Belle Chasse area.

The EPA budget also includes \$17 million to reduce nutrient pollution throughout the Mississippi River basin, including Midwest farmland, said EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson in a separate news conference. The effort is aimed at reducing the size of the annual summertime low-oxygen "dead zone" in the Gulf of Mexico along Louisiana's coastline.

The Fish & Wildlife Service budget also includes \$3 million to expand the Upper Ouachita National Wildlife Refuge in northeastern Louisiana and \$1 million to expand the Red River National Wildlife Refuge in northwestern Louisiana.

A major loser in the Obama budget is the proposed widening of the Industrial Canal lock, which would receive no money. The widening project has been attacked by national environmental groups and by residents of the Holy Cross neighborhood in New Orleans as wasteful spending and a potential environmental threat. But the project is supported by the shipping industry, which is looking for ways to increase the size of vessels entering the canal and the eastern channel of the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway.

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