



White House announces road map for coastal restoration in Louisiana, Mississippi

**By Mark Schleifstein, The Times-Picayune
March 04, 2010**

A White House working group of Cabinet-level officials on Thursday outlined a road map for speeding the design and construction of coastal restoration projects in Louisiana and Mississippi, and pledged to give coastal restoration the same priority as navigation and flood protection in future federal decision-making.

The task force promised to identify by this fall a list of major coastal restoration projects in Louisiana and Mississippi aimed at areas with the most critical need and the biggest long-term benefits. The list will be developed in consultation with Louisiana and Mississippi officials and local stakeholders.



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Nancy Sutley, chairwoman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, speaks during a visit to the Bayou Bienvenue coastal restoration site in New Orleans' Lower 9th Ward in October.

During the next 18 months, the group also pledged to speed the existing restoration process by identifying ways to improve the science used to design and build projects and increasing the use of sediment dredged from the Mississippi and other rivers to rebuild wetlands, among other new measures.

The Obama administration's decision to create the working group to focus on coastal restoration in the two states is aimed at elevating concerns about coastal habitat, including the effects of sea level rise from global warming, to the national level, said Nancy Sutley, chairman

of the White House Council on Environmental Quality and co-chair of the working group, during a conference call.

"We are really trying to emphasize two things today," Sutley said. "One is that the federal government is on the job here. We're all working together. We understand the urgency, the need of getting our house in order.

"The other important issue is that we need to position coastal restoration and protection for the region front-and-center on the part of the federal government."

The working group was established in October after Louisiana officials complained about delays by the Corps of Engineers in advancing restoration projects, and the lack of specific recommendations in the draft of the Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration Study.

That study was supposed to recommend a combination of levee improvements and wetlands and barrier island projects to protect communities along the state's coastline from the storm surge caused by the equivalent of Category 5 hurricanes. The study, still being reviewed by the corps, has estimated the costs of building much higher levees -- as high as 45 feet -- combined with a wide variety of river diversions, use of pipelines to transport sediment for inland wetlands, and simply building new wetlands or barrier islands and beaches, at between \$59 billion and \$139 billion over 30 to 40 years.

It also recommended another three-year set of studies to determine which projects should be built.

A similar Mississippi study has already been passed on to Congress, which authorized 15 interim projects, costing \$110 million, in 2006, and another \$439 million last year for barrier island and other restoration projects.

Louisiana officials have repeatedly complained that coastal restoration has taken a back seat to navigation in decisions by the corps on how to spend money, especially in how to use sediment dredged from the Mississippi River navigation channel.

The corps has said its hands are tied by laws that require it to dispose of much of the dirt in the cheapest way possible.

Sutley and other task force members said elevating restoration to the same level as navigation and levee-building will help focus the corps and other agencies on the importance of restoration projects.

"Unless we stem the rapid rate of ecosystem loss in the region, the ecosystems and the services they provide will collapse, with negative consequences for the marine and terrestrial

environment, national commerce, the maritime industry, energy security, fisheries, and the rich cultural legacy of the Louisiana and Mississippi Gulf Coast," said the working group's road map document.

The document received mostly praise from state politicians and environmentalists, mixed with continuing concern about future delays and the lack of money for restoration projects.

"The current federal process is broken and fundamental change is needed to restore our coast and protect the more than two million Louisianans that live in coastal Louisiana," Gov. Bobby Jindal said in a statement. "This road map is a good first step that clearly demonstrates a positive shift in direction, but must be coupled with aggressive action on the ground -- turning dirt. There is no time for delay."

Garret Graves, chairman of the state's Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority and Jindal's senior adviser on coastal issues, said work on projects that already have been approved should not be delayed.

"We must concurrently be making large investments to make up for the last 80 years of inaction, and ensure that we employ each aspect of a 'multiple lines of defense' strategy," Graves said.

The report endorses the multiple lines strategy developed by the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation, which recommends recognizing the effectiveness of wetlands, barrier islands, natural ridges, levees, roads and other natural and human-built structures as ways of protecting the coast.

"The working group's proposals will put this program into gear with strong new leadership, better science and improved coordination among federal and state partners to restore the Mississippi River Delta, as well as to create safe and resilient communities," said a joint statement from the lake foundation, Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, Environmental Defense Fund, Gulf Restoration Network, National Audubon Society and National Wildlife Federation.

Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., also praised the report.

"The first recommendation of this group is that we establish a new model for implementing and executing this important work. I could not agree more," Landrieu said in a statement. "We cannot be hamstrung by the bureaucracy of the corps or the red tape of any other federal agency."

U.S. Rep. Steve Scalise warned that a federal law providing Louisiana with a larger share of offshore oil revenue doesn't provide enough money to pay the state's share of construction

costs until 2017 and beyond.

"While I am encouraged that the Administration is paying attention to our coastal restoration needs in Louisiana, what we really need from the president is a clear commitment not just to study the problems, but also to authorize and fund immediate revenue sharing so we can restore the coastal wetlands that have eroded, and re-establish the barrier to weaken future storms and protect our communities from flooding," Scalise said.

Graves said he and other state officials also have discussed with the working group how to speed up the delivery of offshore revenue to Louisiana to levels closer to the 50 percent provided to states where onshore oil and gas is produced from federal lands.