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'Direct action beats legislation'

Lafourche residents unite to battle coastal erosion

Bernard Chaillot
bchaillot@theadvertiser.com
May 19, 2003

PORT FOURCHON — A \$750,000 community-based project in Lafourche Parish could be a blueprint for coastal restoration work in Acadiana and throughout Louisiana. The Edward Wisner Donation Properties project broke ground Friday at one of the nation's busiest and most ecologically sensitive offshore energy ports. The initiative sprang to life with \$250,000 in private funding.



P.C. Piazza/ppiazza@theadvertiser.com Mell Jackson, an exchange student with the University of New Orleans from Southern Cross University in Lismore, Australia, wires together a fence that will trap sand and protect new plantings along Port Fourchon.

"Instead of waiting for the state and federal government to act, the Wisner Foundation donated seed money to leverage grant funding," said Kerry St. Pé, director of the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program. "Lafourche Parish residents and others are helping do the work. Direct action beats legislation."

W.P. "Judge" Edwards III of Abbeville, a land manager and chairman of the Vermilion Parish Coastal Restoration Committee, is among those who say major landowners could be key to forming partnerships to design and construct community-based projects in Acadiana's irreplaceable wetlands — as Wisner did here. St. Pé said the state's marshland estuaries are disintegrating at a quicker clip than

any other land mass on the planet. The loss often is compared to an area the size of a football field every 30 minutes.

"It is disappearing not-so-slowly in our own lifetime, before our very eyes," he said. "It's up to us to live up to our duty to protect and preserve what I believe is a sacred trust and bequeath it to future

generations."

Private property owners hold sway over a great majority of the coastal acreage that supports 80 percent of the country's offshore energy resources, a

third of its seafood catches and about the same slice of prime wintering habitat for ducks, geese and other migratory waterfowl.

“It is crucial and indeed necessary for landowners to play a leadership role in society’s responsibility to be good stewards of the land,” St.



Pé said. “Both for themselves and their children and grandchildren.”

The 2,000-acre project within the 35,000-acre Wisner properties includes the creation of 45 acres of brackish marsh, shoreline protection work, limestone banks to slow canal erosion, beach preservation with plantings of mangrove and other vegetation, sediment diversion and barrier island reinforcement.

“Almost every type of coastal restoration work done in the state is included,” Wisner board member Cathy Norman said. “The best thing is, we created partnerships. People volunteered to pitch in. When the federal government saw we put up the first \$250,000, a \$500,000 grant was that much easier to get.”

The grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, a project partner, is one of 14 statewide designed to encourage and help fund community-based projects. “Communities with vision and an unconditional vow to succeed can really do a lot,” NOAA marine habitat specialist Cheryl Brodnax said.

Brodnax and Brian Kendrick, a design engineer for project partner Morris Hebert Inc. of Thibodaux, toured a fragile strip of beach Friday. The trembling spit of sand is all that stands between the relentless pounding of surf from the Gulf of Mexico and thousands of acres of fresh and brackish marsh.



Less than 50 yards wide in some areas, the beach was breached in two places last fall by the one-two punch of Tropical Storm Isidore and Hurricane Lili. More than 100 volunteers planted nearly 2,500 black mangrove trees along the stretch Thursday and Friday to help thwart further washouts.

“This work literally is in the nick of time,” Kendrick said. “The next storm of any strength could wipe out this entire stretch and basically allow Gulf tides to flow unhindered into the marsh,” he said. “It’s a very scary scenario and would be a devastating and possibly irreversible blow to our restoration efforts.”

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May 19, 2003

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