

Major efforts underway to protect beaches

Louisiana beach latest to get aid

by Walter Bonora

A beach restoration project that will help protect fragile Louisiana wetlands began in May at Holly Beach in Cameron Parish.

The project will reverse the area's alarming rate of shoreline erosion and protect over 10,000 acres of fragile wetlands critical to the sustainability of the communities in the parish.

"The Holly Beach area has long been a high priority of the State's coastal restoration program," said Jack Caldwell, Secretary, Louisiana Department of Natural Resources.

In a negotiated lease with the state's Department of Natural Resources, MMS authorized the removal of over 4 million cubic yards of sand from federal offshore sites for the project.

"In keeping with our obligation to the environment, I am pleased that this project will enhance the overall health and safety of the area's fragile habitat," said MMS Director Johnnie Burton. "We take seriously our commitment to help protect eroded beaches and U.S. coastlines."

Beach erosion is a national problem. Nearly 80 percent of the U.S. coastline has been hard hit by coastal erosion. In Louisiana the state's outer coastline is currently eroding at an alarming rate of 50 feet per year, making Louisiana the erosion "hot spot" of America. Coastal storms, like hurricanes,



A bulldozer moves sand in a beach restoration project in Florida

file photo

nor'easters and El Nino events, force changes in beach position. Other factors like urbanization contribute to the problem.

MMS has long worked with certain coastal states to help restore damaged or eroded coastlines. Ten years ago, these states, realizing their near-shore sand supplies were nearly exhausted, began asking the agency to help find new supplies in federal waters.

Through agreements with local and federal agencies, sand is removed from federal offshore sites and used for beach

restoration. In September, a restoration project will begin on Assateuge Island National Seashore in Maryland. Several agencies including MMS will be involved in the rebuilding effort of the islands's pristine shoreline.

On the horizon are projects at Virginia Beach and Dam Neck Naval Facility in Virginia, Jacksonville Beach in Florida, and several beaches in New Jersey and the Carolinas. Meanwhile, MMS continues its search for new sand deposits to meet these future needs.

Sand Dunes: Why they are important

Often called by scientists the last line of defense against storms, sand dunes are eroding fast in our nation. From top to bottom on the Atlantic seaboard sand dunes are disappearing at an alarming rate. Much of this is because of coastal development, natural erosion, and catastrophic storms like hurricanes.

Sand dunes are an accumulation of wind driven sand into a distinctive shape. They are formed by winds, blowing from sea to land, that carry sand grains from the dry beach and deposit them to form dunes. Dunes range in height from less than a meter to hundreds of meters and can be hundreds of meters wide.

State and federal efforts to improve the health of these natural formations



have shown positive signs in some coastal states. Yet there is still concern for their overall stability.

"Sand dunes are an important part of the coast because they protect the beach from eroding so deep that an inlet is formed," said Roger Amato of MMS.

"Dunes also protect the area behind the beach from storm surges, hurricanes, and erosion. They provide habitat for many coastal plants and animals, including nesting sites for sea turtles and birds."

Dunes tend to be in equilibrium with the beach. If the beach is stable, so are the adjacent dunes; if the beach is migrating, so are its dunes.

Examples of prominent coastal dunes can be found at Cape Cod, Massachusetts, Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, and Coos Bay, Oregon.