

Terracing project pilot for coastal restoration work

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LITTLE VERMILION BAY — The first coastal restoration project in Acadiana using raised berms to buffer wave action, trap sediment and create new wetlands is working much sooner than anticipated.

The Little Vermilion Bay Sediment Trapping Project, completed in August 1999 for less than \$1 million, served as the pilot project for similar work throughout the region's coastal zone. Two similar jobs now are under way, one south of Pecan Island and the Four Mile Canal project south of Intracoastal City.

The project here will create more than 400 new acres of new wetlands over the next 20 years. During a tour by helicopter and airboat last week, it was evident sediment is filling in the gaps between the berms at a rate that surprises state and federal officials who expected it to take up to twice as long.

"We knew it would work but didn't expect to see this much progress in less than four years," said Eric Zobrist of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration headquarters in Washington. "We thought it would be at this point after about 10 years. So we are extremely encouraged by what we see."

John Foret of NOAA's office at the National Wetlands Research Center at UL Lafayette said one of the silver linings of Tropical Storm Isidore and Hurricane Lili last fall is the enormous amounts of sediment deposited from extraordinarily high tides generated by storm surges.

On a recent trip to a restoration project at Chenier Au Tigre, a coastal ridge between Pecan and Marsh islands, National Audubon Society refuge manager Tim Vincent marveled at the amount of sediment between terraces. The sediment already is greening up with a variety of native grasses and trees.

"It amazes me how fast it's working," Vincent said. The sediment pokes above the chop of the shallow lake at low tide. It will become new marsh as sediment builds and more vegetation roots, Vincent said.

The project in the northwest corner of Little Vermilion Bay where it abuts the Intracoastal Canal covers nearly 1,000 acres of irreplaceable wetlands. Louisiana's marshland estuary nurses a third of both the nation's annual seafood catch and its wintering habitat for migratory waterfowl.

Up to 80 percent of the country's offshore energy revenues depend on oil and gas infrastructure now threatened by the worst ongoing land loss in the world. U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-New Orleans, insists that preserving the state's wetlands is vital to national security, among many other concerns.

She said it will take an estimated \$14 billion over the next 50 years to adequately address the problem.

Native rattlebox and black willow trees now grow here on islands of

dredged sediment held together by giant bulrush and other marsh grass. Night herons and many other wading birds stalk prey in the shallows.

W.P. "Judge" Edwards III, a coastal land manager and chairman of the parish Police Jury's Coastal Restoration Advisory Committee, noted the recent difference between the windblown chop in a nearby open marine navigation channel and the much calmer tidal flow on the shielded side of the man-made islands.

He said the project will lead to greater water clarity and better fishing conditions — a key point of contention in an ongoing debate over the freshwater needs of rice and crawfish farmers, cattle ranchers and others versus the desire of some recreational fishing groups for saltier water and less turbidity.

Edwards said the berms "convert a low-value habitat into a high-value habitat that attracts juvenile and adult marine species by creating a supermarket for the base of the food chain. Not only will the fishing be better, it will be done in a way that creates new wetlands instead of eroding them with more salt water."

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