Project designed to rebuild lost wetland

By BRUCE SCHULTZ

Acadiana bureau

PECAN ISLAND -- A federally funded $2.9 million project will build new marsh and prevent further land loss at this rural community in Vermilion Parish, according to the project manager.

John Foret, wetland ecologist for the National Marine Fisheries Service, said the terracing project will correct decades of agricultural activity that exposed the wetlands to wind and wave action.

"We've had 60 years of pumping off water, and cattle were allowed to graze on it," Foret said. "We're not suggesting that was right or wrong, but that was just the technique years ago."

Storms in the 1970s washed away a levee system, he said, creating a large lake of more than 3,000 acres.

The 200,000 feet of terracing is a grid of levees made of mud dug from the lake bed. The work started Dec. 20 and is 90 percent complete.

"The idea was we could calm the winds coming from the south and the north with frontal passages," Foret said.

Vegetation, both natural and cultivated cordgrass and bullrush, will cover the terraces, Foret said. A similar project in Little Vermilion Bay, he said, was a quick success, with vegetation growing in only nine months.

"Just give it a toehold and it will take off."

He said the project is possible because of the hard clay and sand beneath the marsh that provides a good foundation. This type of project wouldn't work in eastern Louisiana, he said, because the Mississippi River sediment wouldn't support the weight of the levee construction.

"You couldn't do this over there because it would sink out of sight."

The land belongs to the M.O. Miller Estate, but it will benefit more than that entity, he said, with improved fish habitat and protection of adjoining marsh and the Pecan Island community, only 5 miles from the Gulf of Mexico.

The project is being done under the Coastal Wetlands Planning Protection and Restoration Act.

Click here to return to story:
http://www.2theadvocate.com/stories/061103/new_wetland001.shtml