

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

We have reviewed the body of literature concerning the causes and potential consequences of wetland loss in Louisiana. We have tried but have been unable to find any evidence that this ecosystem can be saved without massive efforts to correct the cumulative damage that has occurred over the last fifty years, efforts that will require the assistance of federal, state, local, and private organizations.

Wetland loss in Louisiana is a problem for the nation. The United States benefits from the shipping that passes through the Mississippi River, both economically and in terms of national security; but for the last century, efforts to maintain the shipping lanes have taken a toll on the natural ability of the river to supply the wetlands with sediment. The entire nation has benefited from the extraction of oil and gas, which has been permitted by the federal government; but the canals that were necessary to provide access to the wells have left a legacy of conduits by which saltwater can invade and destroy the wetlands. The federal government has participated in the construction of flood control levees and dams along the Mississippi River and its tributaries, which also deprive the wetlands of sediment.

The Louisiana Legislature has recognized that wetland loss is also a problem for the state, and created the Coastal Environment Protection Trust Fund. Several coastal parishes also have programs to address wetland loss. Private landowners have important economic incentives to take measures to protect their wetlands as well.

While moving forward with the initial set of projects, it is now time to examine the big picture regarding the fate of coastal Louisiana. A lengthy public debate may be necessary. Neither this panel nor its individual members mean to prejudice the outcome of the study we propose in favor of a particular long-term solution. But only if all the facts are laid out on the table for all the technically viable options will it be possible for the state and the nation to arrive at a plan that will make the next generation happy with our actions rather than regret our lack of foresight. While various parties may have different views on the best ways to manage the effort to protect wetlands, we all have a common interest in ensuring that these decisions are based on the best possible understanding of their likely outcomes.