



US Army Corps
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New Orleans District

Riverside

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Federal-state team gains ground on saving coastal wetlands



Coastal cooperation

District clears hurdle with historic LCA agreement

By Eric Lincoln

In an official ceremony at Louisiana State University on Jan. 31, Lt. Gen. Carl Strock, chief of engineers, signed his own Chief of Engineer's Report, a summary for the Congress on the Louisiana Coastal Area (LCA) Ecosystem Restoration Study. The chief's signature is a historic step in the advancement of the coastal restoration blueprint.

The study is a multi-agency achievement headed by a partnership between the Corps and the state's Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

The entire LCA study spreads over five volumes: the main report, environmental impact statement, public comments and responses, a multi-part volume from science to history to modeling; and the plan formulation.

A pair of symbolic team achievement awards were presented during the ceremony to recognize the 150 or so individuals involved in the study.

Additionally, the Corps and the state, represented by Lt. Gen. Strock and Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, signed a partnership agreement dedicating their "combined efforts towards a common goal of reversing the current trend of degradation of Louisiana's coastal ecosystem."

The agreement ensures cooperation between the Corps and the state for long-term coastal restoration.

Late nights

"A lot of people went above and beyond the call of duty to prepare this report," said Kevin Wagner, senior project manager.

"We were working until 3 and 4 a.m. some nights. The dedication and commitment by everyone was amazing."

The LCA team originally planned to create a comprehen-

sive, long-term report, but the administration was concerned with the scientific uncertainties associated with a 30-year program. So, they requested a near-term plan that would address the uncertainties and critical needs, plus projects that could be initiated within 10 years.

"Since we received that guidance, it's taken 10 months to put the short-term report together. Feasibility reports usually take 3 to 5 years, so this is phenomenal, especially since we're talking about a \$2 billion program," said Wagner.

A common goal

Helping to draft sections of the report were DNR, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, National Marine Fisheries, U.S. Geological Survey, Environmental Protection Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Mississippi Valley Division, Corps Headquarters and others, including co-located team members working in the same office.

"A lot of people went above and beyond the call of duty to prepare this report."

Kevin Wagner, senior project manager

"Having the co-located team members readily accessible was a tremendous advantage," said Wagner.

"I came to this office from Project Management East three months ago, in the midst of the chaos ... the dedication here, then and now, is incredible. And the partnership agreement between Gov. Blanco and Lt. Gen. Strock is another great indication of the commitment up the line."

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Lane Lefort

Louisiana's wetlands represent an environmental resource of national significance. *Inset:* members of Coastal Branch take a break for a group photo.

At the division level, “There were a lot of hours spent resolving policy issues and coordinating with the sponsor, headquarters and other federal agencies to keep this critical project on schedule,” said Rayford Wilbanks, New Orleans District support team leader and division office project manager for LCA.

“The state and our vertical integration teams at the district, division and headquarters were instrumental in processing technical and policy issues along the way for swift resolutions ... This is a tremendous milestone for the state and the nation.”

At headquarters, “There’s lots of activity on the Senate side for the Water Resources Development Bill,” said Zoltan Montvai, deputy chief for the MVD regional integration team. “We’re hopeful for authorization this year that would give us \$1.2 billion worth of funding and reinforce support for the \$2 billion near-term restoration plan.”

At the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the LCA report has been a learning experience.

“Frankly, it was a remarkable achievement to get this done within this timeframe,” said Jon Porthouse, planning section manager, DNR. “There were constantly shifting expectations from all sides but, together, we met each challenge.”

The state, through DNR, works as a 50/50 partner with the Corps in implementing LCA.

“There was so much going into this in such a short time ... naturally, there were differences in perspective, from the Corps, from the public and even our own management about what the report needed. We all knew where we wanted to end up, but we were figuring it out until the end.”



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Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco and Lt. Gen. Carl Strock, chief of engineers, with Brig. Gen. Robert Crear, Mississippi Valley Division commander, at the signing table during the LCA ceremony.

“The staff at New Orleans District worked some extremely long hours and we appreciate the efforts,” said Porthouse. “With the report approved, however, you could say we’ve crossed the foothills and are staring at a mountain.”

The department worked extensively with the district on public meetings, adding staff and logistics, coordinating presentations, and assisting with questions and answers.

Getting approval

Project authorization is the next hurdle, followed by securing congressional appropriations: \$20 million is requested in the President’ budget for FY 2006, up from the \$8.5 million appropriated in 2005.

Under the plan signed this month, the LCA team must produce “feasibility-level decision documents” that address

Coastal erosion victim – this majestic oak along the Lake Salvador shoreline grew for hundreds of years on terra firma but ultimately became surrounded by water. It died and fell over recently, a stark representation of the typical problems associated with coastal erosion in south Louisiana.



Lane Lefort

evaluation, design and documentation for each recommended project so that decisions can be made regarding implementation. These documents would be submitted to either the assistant secretary to the Army or Congress for authorization.

Once the documents are approved, says Wagner, “we hope to be in a position to begin at least 11 of the 15 projects.”

Working within the USACE 2012 concepts, the team plans to bring in folks as needed from within New Orleans District and other districts, plus consulting firms and academia, to strengthen the team and execute large-volume projects.

Public opinion

Troy Constance, Coastal Branch chief, said that addressing critical areas under the near-term plan meant excluding a lot of the western part of the state. “Particularly in the area around Lake Charles, we had to prioritize, and that meant certain projects near and dear to people’s hearts had to be left out of the plan.”

“People have been polite at public meetings,” said Wagner. “They understand the justifications. The main comment was, ‘do what you have to, but make sure we aren’t forgotten.’”

“The overall public participation effort was by far the most effective I’ve seen,” agreed Porthouse, “though we still have some work to do to meet the public’s lofty expectations for participation.

“Getting the public to understand why we were pursuing the near-term plan was the biggest hurdle. They felt the projects didn’t measure up to the scope of the problem. They wanted long-term comprehensive action. When the



Caminada Shoreline and Shell Island are at the top of the LCA to-do list. Restoration will preserve the integrity of the western and central boundaries of Barataria Basin and protect the fragile inland marshes from encroachment by the Gulf of Mexico.

Grand Isle

Caminada Shoreline

Corps and state signed on to the study, it was for a 30-year plan, then halfway through, we switched to a near-term plan. Some felt like we abandoned the whole thing for the near-term plan. They were concerned for their projects.

“The public is supportive but with reservations, and that’s easy to understand. In some cases, their way of life depends on what we do out there.”

“We obviously have a lot of support from the administration right now,” added Constance. “You can see that from the large amounts of money being committed. But keeping the public and the administration on our side is always an issue ... with each action we take, we have to continuously demonstrate that the investment is worth the return. There’s interest today, but it’s incumbent on us to continue to demonstrate what we can do, to justify the investment.”

Technically, there weren’t major

Members of the LCA team prepare to mail the draft report in July. “We were working to meet a deadline,” said Jennifer Lefort, team member. “It was around 6 p.m. on a Friday, and some of us had been working since 7 a.m. the previous day.”



Shell Island

problems in completing the report. “My thought was, if we can put a person on the moon, we sure ought to be able to design an ecosystem restoration project that will succeed,” said Wagner.

Ecosystem first

The biggest challenge now for the LCA team will be dealing with the trade-off analysis—determining what’s best for the ecosystem while including the concerns of one group over another.

“We want to do what’s in the public’s best interest,” said Constance. “After the

1927 flood, for example, the public said they didn’t want to see devastation like that again. They asked us to prevent it, and we built a levee system. In part because of those kinds of projects, we now have coastal erosion. Now the public still wants flood control, but they also want to maintain and restore the coast.

“So we’re going to be changing the dynamics of the

“With each action we take, we have to continuously demonstrate that the investment is worth the return.”

Troy Constance, Coastal Branch chief

ecosystem again, and there will be winners and losers.

“In one area, some people want fresh marsh and grass to grow, and others want speckled trout. But we can’t make both happen. It’s a trade-off. Our job now is to determine the net gain, decide what’s in the overall best interest of the public, and present it so that everyone is educated and willing to cooperate to help us achieve our primary objective of saving the coast by linking the Mississippi River and its resources back to the ecosystem.”

Three projects the Corps and the state have identified as priorities are:

❑ **Barrier Shoreline and Barataria Basin**, to provide a 1,000-foot-wide berm along 13 miles of Caminada Shoreline, create about 139 acres of dune and about 74 acres of marsh at Shell Island (west), and create about 223 acres of

dune and 191 acres of marsh at Shell Island (east). These actions will preserve the integrity of the western and central boundaries of Barataria Basin and protect the fragile inland marshes from encroachment by the Gulf of Mexico. Cost: \$242.6 million.

❑ **Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO)**, to prevent the accelerated loss of marshes, ridges, bayous, ponds, aquatic grass beds and shorelines needed for the Lake Borgne, Lake Pontchartrain and Breton sound estuaries. Projects consist of 15 miles of breakwaters along the southern shoreline of Lake Borgne and 23 miles of rock breakwaters along the north bank to protect 6,350 acres of critical wetlands that would otherwise be lost. (A decision whether to maintain the MRGO navigation channel as a deep-draft shipping route has not been made. A study that is addressing maintaining deep-draft navigation is underway and is scheduled for completion in FY 05.) Cost: \$105.3 million.

❑ **Beneficial Use of Dredged Material Program**, to involve development of a process to maximize beneficial use throughout the entire coastal zone. Objectives include managing the sediment resources resulting from maintenance dredging activities to sustain and rejuvenate existing wetlands and rebuild crucial geomorphic features; utilizing dredged sediments to establish or help maintain natural landscape features and hydrologic processes critical to sustainable ecosystem structure and function; and establishing or helping maintain productive and diverse fish and wildlife habitats through the addition of dredged sediments. Cost: \$100 million.

Time for results

“We want to make sure there’s progress to be seen,” said Wagner. “Folks are tired of hearing that we’re going to study the coast. We need to position ourselves to take action and be ready for it.”

Wagner has personal reasons for working with the LCA team, having witnessed the wetland devastation over the last year.

“The longer we wait, the more land we lose. I see it every day when I cross the Paris Road bridge bringing my kid to school. I see the GIWW and MRGO, and can almost see the wetlands disappearing by the day. I used to go fishing out there. When I took a boat trip a month ago with city representatives to the same location, I was amazed at how much land had disappeared.

“Folks often don’t realize how the erosion impacts us. Those wetlands are all that’s between the Gulf of Mexico and us. And that’s pretty scary when a hurricane is knocking on your door.”

For more information about the LCA study and saving the coast, go to www.lca.gov, www.lacoast.gov and www.coast2050.gov.



Lane Lefort

Construction

HARVEY FLOODGATES—Construction is almost complete on this 175-ton sector gate at Boh Bros. Construction Co. in New Orleans. It and a mirror-image twin will form a 125-foot wide hurricane floodgate on the Harvey Canal. They will be the largest sector gates in the New Orleans District. The largest at present are 110-foot wide on locks. The principal designer was Curtis Eickenloff of Structural Engineering, who's since taken a new job in Europe. This gate's solid left side will face the Gulf of Mexico to deter hurricane storm surges.

Project Management

AIRPORT GROUNDBREAKING—Col. Rowan participates in a groundbreaking at the Louis Armstrong International Airport Feb. 14. In the contract for runway work,

airport officials included construction of a floodgate for the Lake Pontchartrain Hurricane Protection Project. "The airport agreed to do this because the floodgate construction would require the shut down of the airport's east-west runway," said Al Naomi, senior project manager. "By combining this with the runway rehab, a second closure will be avoided. Also, we do not have federal funds to award a contract this year or next, so the

construction of the floodgate by the airport completes a very important contract for us and our local sponsor." The district has one more gap to close in St. Charles Parish and should award that contract in a couple of months.



Lane Lefort

Around the District



Guy Ranzino, the new cafeteria contractor, talks with evaluation team members Shelton Kennedy, Gayle Boone, Lt. Col. Jeselink and Nora Cherry. The cafeteria re-opened for business on Jan. 31 after a few months' hiatus. Ranzino said, "Customer feedback is essential. It's the only way we know if things are right or need to be tuned up. Please let us know what we can do to improve in any way." Email your comments to Nora Cherry, Contracting.

Congratulations

to **Patricia Broussard** (ED) and her husband, Bobby, whose daughter, Bria, received five A's and two B's on her first-quarter report card, 4th Grade, at Jean Gordon Elementary School. Good work, Bria!

Farewell

to **William Lewis** (chief, RE), who retired Feb. 3.

to **Scheryl Forsythe-Bolling** (CT), who transferred to an Army contracting agency in Fort Polk, Feb. 18.

to **Beatriz Perez** (OD), who resigned Feb. 11.

to **Margaret Tucker** (CD), who will retire on April 3 after 37 years of service.

Condolences

to **Libby Bonamour** (HR), whose father, Charles Montgomery, passed away Jan. 31.

to the family of **Felix Mire Jr.** (ED, retired), who passed away Feb. 4.

to the family of **Bonita "Bonnie" Wagner** (RM, retired), who passed away Feb. 8.

to **Jay Ratcliff** (ED), whose mother, Ann Haydel Ratcliff, passed away Feb. 6.

to **Rob Dauenhauer** (ED), whose mother, Rita Blanchard Dauenhauer, passed away Feb. 5.

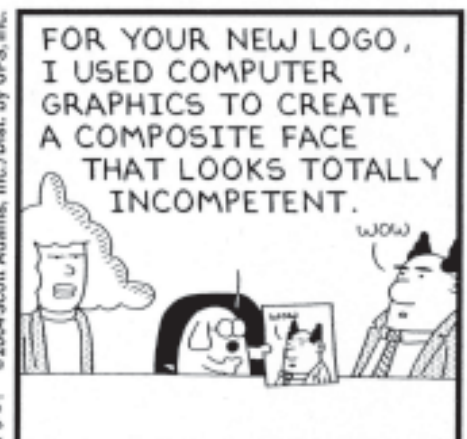
to **Elizabeth White** (WCSC), whose daughter, Nicole White, passed away Jan. 28.

to **Marilyn Sirkis** (CD, LAO), whose mother, Esla Lemoine, passed away Jan. 29.



Oil platform ahoy -- This salvaged offshore oil platform jacket and its barge are temporarily tied up at district headquarters for our downstream neighbor, Bisso Marine Co., a salvage company, while the Corps places rock in the river at its facility. "Jackets" are used as templates for pile-driving during construction of oil rigs. Old jackets are often used for artificial reef development.

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Castle Kids Parade



Photos, Lane Lefort

The Krewe of Looney Tunes holds its 7th Mardi Gras parade on Feb 3, presided over by King Winston Hermann, son of Winston and Michelle Hermann, community parents, and Queen Trinity Bierre, daughter of Terrance and Nicole Bierre, community parents.



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