

THE COALITION TO RESTORE COASTAL LOUISIANA

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Studies through the years showed that the coast of Louisiana, which includes the only great delta ecosystem in North America, the Mississippi River delta, was disappearing at the rate of 25 to 40 square miles per year. Between 1930 and 1995, Louisiana's coastal land mass was reduced by approximately 1.2 million acres, or 30%. The state, which contained approximately 25 percent of the coastal wetlands in the United States, was sustaining about 80% of the nation's coastal wetlands losses.

The Mississippi delta is of economic as well as environmental importance. Its fisheries, both recreational and commercial, contribute about \$2 billion to Louisiana's economy each year, and supply a large part of the nation's commercial catch. This activity produces about 50,000 to 70,000 jobs for the people of Louisiana. The delta area provides about 50 percent of the nation's fur harvest, and it is the nursery and feeding area for millions of waterfowl. In addition, the coastal wetlands provide hurricane and storm protection for the inhabitants of the coastal zone. This is important because about 65% of the population of Louisiana lives within 50 miles of the coast.

Stewardship Basis for Growth

Beginning in 1986, concerns for the health and vitality of the coastal lands, its communities and economy, spurred informal meetings among environmental activists, scientists and concerned coastal residents. They came together to discuss possibilities for taking action to halt the loss of coastal lands. They recognized that the loss of land is caused by human actions—the siting and protection of industries, communities, levees, and transportation infrastructure—as much as natural occurrences. As a result of these discussions, the participants decided to try to do something to halt the loss.

In 1987, several different religious denominations passed a common resolution that urged the people of Louisiana, particularly those in coastal parishes, to accept personal responsibility for environmental

stewardship. They also urged their members to support groups and politicians who accepted responsibility for environmental stewardship. Over the next two years, churches and synagogues throughout coastal Louisiana sponsored 20 forums attracting more than 2,000 people to learn about ways to protect and restore wetlands.

In early 1988, the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana (CRCL) was established by the informal, ad hoc group of interested parties. The Coalition was incorporated as a nonprofit 501(c)(3). By 1989, more than 60 clubs, businesses and organizations belonged to the coalition. At that time, more than forty people served on the Board of Directors. Most were representatives of religious organizations, universities, local governments, service organizations, environmental groups, small businesses or tourist bureaus. Among them were attorneys, scientists, environmentalists and landowners. About twenty-five scientists and engineers agreed to act as advisors. Today, nearly 150 businesses, corporations, trade associations, civic, religious and environmental groups and hundreds of individual members are involved in the Coalition's advocacy mission for the restoration and preservation of the Mississippi River Delta and the coastal wetlands of Louisiana.

Ambitious Citizen Action Plan Realized

The Coalition has received a number of foundation grants and challenge grants that were matched by in-state donations. In April 1989, the Coalition released a citizens' action plan for saving the Delta, Coastal Louisiana: *Here Today and Gone Tomorrow?*. Draft reports were circulated among government agencies, fishermen's associations, research institutions, environmental and conservation clubs, civic groups, religious organizations, coastal landowners, scientific consulting firms and private businesses and industry, for their comments. The plan proposed to:

- create dedicated, recurring and substantial state and federal funds for investment to preserve and restore threatened coastal wetlands;
- introduce the restoration of the Mississippi River Delta as an important component of the national environmental agenda;
- fast track and coordinate coastal wetlands restoration efforts by the Governor's office; and
- convince Congress to expand the mission and mandate of the Army Corps of

Engineers to include wetlands creation and preservation in addition to the traditional jobs of maintaining navigation and flood control.

The plan was considered extremely ambitious and generally was viewed as unlikely to be realized in the foreseeable future. But, in 1989, voters of the state approved a constitutionally protected Wetlands Conservation and Restoration Fund. This fund is in the form of trust, funded by a portion of the oil and gas royalties received by the state, which provides up to \$20 million annually for coastal restoration efforts.

The Coalition then developed a national "Save the Wetlands" campaign that helped move Congress to pass the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act (CWPPRA) in 1990. CWPPRA provides \$40 million annually to restore Louisiana's coastal wetlands.

Federal/State Task Force Oversees Restoration

A task force composed of six federal agencies (the Departments of the Army, Interior, Commerce, and Agriculture, and the Environmental Protection Agency) and the State of Louisiana was created to manage planning and project construction. The task force gets input from citizens through public meetings and an advisory Citizens' Participation Group (CPG). The Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana has played a major role in the selection of restoration projects under CWPPRA. In 1995, it led discussions of how to improve the selection process used by the CWPPRA Task Force and the criteria it uses in choosing restoration projects.

Over the past five years, 65 projects have been selected by the CWPPRA task force and the state. Five of these projects have been completed, or partially completed, and seven more are under construction. By year end, eight are expected to be complete and 14 under construction.

Restoration projects range in estimated cost from a high of \$8,142,000 to a low of \$126,000. A sampling of completed projects include:

- Bayou LaBranche Marsh Creation: Completed in April, 1994, this project recreated 350 acres of marsh that had been lost to conversion and flooding. Once the area has settled, it is expected to be a freshwater and intermediate marsh that will serve as a valuable nursery habitat for finfish and shellfish.
- Cameron Prairie National Wildlife

Refuge Erosion Protection and Marsh Enhancement: This project protects more than 640 acres of freshwater marsh to prevent erosion of the spoil bank that separates the wetlands from the waterway.

- Vegetative Planting Demonstration Project: Four locations, including West Hackberry in Cameron Parish, DeWitt-Rollover in Vermillion, and Timbalier Island and Falgout Canal in Terrebonne, are sites intended to demonstrate the suitability of using various plants to decrease erosion in areas prone to salt water intrusion and wave action.

Citizens' Restoration Support Agenda

In its ongoing effort to support coastal restoration and preservation, The Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana has a number of projects on its agenda designed to inform, involve and educate citizens, non-governmental organizations, and businesses:

- supporting CoastWatch, local citizens' groups;
- sponsoring student field trips;
- developing educational programs;
- maintaining a speakers' bureau;
- publishing *CoastWise* magazine, a semi-annual, and *Coast Currents*, a monthly newsletter;
- creating a Christmas Trees Project to build barriers in wetlands using Christmas trees; and
- testifying at state and national hearings in support of wetlands protection and coastal restoration legislation.

CoastWatch is a project of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana. CoastWatch groups are coalitions of local conservation and civic groups and individuals formed by volunteers to work on water quality, habitat or coastal restoration issues in their area.

Each region in Louisiana is faced with different conservation or restoration issues; consequently each CoastWatch group sets its own agenda, structure and policy. The group becomes a way for local citizens to gather and share information about important local conservation issues, and to organize and act quickly when necessary. CoastWatch groups have:

- monitored and made suggestions for expenditures for state and federal coastal restoration funds;
- improved sewage treatment laws and enforcement;
- worked on regional river planning;
- opposed projects harmful to the aquatic environment; and

How To Get in Touch with The Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana

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Scope: Regional, national, coastal, urban/rural

Inception Date: 1989

Participants: Businesses, community organizations, individuals, group members

Project type: Restoration/cleanup, public education, citizen-led initiative
Methods used: Education, organizing citizens' groups, newsletter, media programs, workshops

Lessons learned: People can make a difference; motivated and informed citizen action has catalyzed state and national policy; important to move away from assigning blame and instead move toward solutions.

- produced education materials.

The Coalition offers CoastWatch groups the latest information on wetlands and coastal issues; technical and legal expertise; assistance in forming and maintaining an effective local conservation group; funding and development assistance; and statewide support for local initiatives.

The Coalition also sponsors workshops in different areas of the state on issues related to coastal preservation. For example, it held a two-day Barrier Shoreline Restoration workshop in New Orleans in the spring of 1995. More than 100 people attended to hear speakers and panel members from as far away as Maine, New Hampshire and Virginia. The Coalition also holds Louisiana Wetlands Workshops with local residents and guest speakers showing how citizens depend on healthy wetlands for food, safety, recreation and livelihoods.

Education projects include field trips that take students into coastal wetlands to teach them about the problem of erosion and restoration solutions. Other education projects

include classroom presentations that use slides, video and activities to explain the process of coastal loss and efforts at coastal restoration in Louisiana.

—Community Sustainability Resource Institute



UPDATE

December 1997

The Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana continues to be active, both locally and nationally. The restoration program that the Coalition helped to create, and in which it has remained active, has identified 81 potential restoration and preservation projects. Of these, 17 projects have been completed and 6 more are under construction.

The Coalition recently completed "Course Correction," a report aimed at developing a sustainable vision for the Mississippi River Corridor. A second report, "No Time to Lose; the Future of Louisiana Without Full Scale Coastal Restoration," will be released soon. This report aims at being a strategy for full implementation of the state-federal coastal restoration strategy for Louisiana.

In September, 1997, the Coalition started the Davis Pond Freshwater Diversion Project in St. Charles Parish just west of New Orleans. This project, the largest freshwater diversion begun so far, marks the beginning of the next phase of Louisiana's coastal restoration effort. The Coalition's long range plans include developing and implementing, with a joint state and federal task force, a coordinated plan and strategy for coastal restoration.

The Coalition has added three more local CoastWatch citizen groups, for a total of six in the state, and they continue to publish *CoastWise* magazine.

The Coalition's efforts at the national level have also been important. They are now working with 11 other major coastal organizations on the Restore America's Estuaries Campaign. This campaign is directed toward raising public awareness and encouraging cultural and economic dialogues. Their goal is to restore one million acres of wetlands by the year 2010. They believe that achieving this goal is possible through the development of constructive partnerships between state, federal, local, and private entities.

—Community Sustainability Resource Institute