



BARATARIA-TERREBONNE NATIONAL ESTUARY PROGRAM

Location:

*South-central
Louisiana*

Project size:

4 million acres

Initiators:

*U.S.
Environmental
Protection Agency,
State of Louisiana*

PROJECT AREA DESCRIPTION

Consisting of two adjacent river basins, the project area is generally bounded on the North and East by the Mississippi River, on the West by the Atchafalaya Basin floodway levee, and the South by the Gulf of Mexico. The basins are divided by Bayou Lafourche, a major transportation artery that once served as a main channel of the Mississippi River. The entire project area lies with the Mississippi deltaic plain and is characterized by very little topographical relief. The basins consist of large tracts of fresh, brackish, and salt water marshes and shallow open bays. South Louisiana contains 40% of the coastal wetlands in the lower 48 states.

Originally, much of the area consisted of forested wetlands. Currently, agriculture (sugar cane primarily) is the predominant land use, with limited cattle grazing and oil and gas development. Urban expansion has primarily occurred on old abandoned tributary ridges of the Mississippi, the only areas that do not flood frequently.

ECOSYSTEM STRESSES

Hydrologic disruption is the primary stress to the ecosystem, especially since the great Mississippi flood of 1927, after which extensive levees were built along the river. These levees have led to a loss of sediment, nutrients, and freshwater that annually nourished the bottomland forests and marshes. The region has experienced an 80% loss of its original wetlands, which is continuing at the rate of approximately 21 square miles per year. The loss in habitat has significantly altered or eliminated living resources in the basins. Numerous canals for oil and gas well access, transportation, and drainage have reduced sheet flow. Finally, water quality degradation --

eutrophication to toxics pollution -- has resulted from agricultural, urban, oil and gas, and sewage run-off.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This effort is one of 21 National Estuary Programs (NEPs), a nationwide program authorized by the Clean Water Act. Because of its important aquatic biodiversity, the Louisiana Governor submitted a nomination to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1989 for the "BT" to be an NEP site. Following its acceptance, the program officially began in late 1991. It will last five years. Its goals (as for all NEPs) are to: 1) identify ecosystem problems; 2) characterize the problems by identifying data gaps, research needs, and status and trends; and 3) produce a management plan. Implementation will then follow for 20-40 years, to be assumed by the state. The effort is coordinated by the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality, with EPA providing 75% of the funds and the state providing the remainder.

In order to include as many stakeholders and planning aspects as possible, five committees have been established. Two committees -- Policy, Management -- have primary control of the process. The other three committees -- Science & Technology, Citizen Advisory, Local Government -- make recommendations to the Management Committee. The latter three committees serve a two-way function, educating their constituents on the need and progress of this effort and representing constituent interests to the agencies. In all, over 100 partici-

BARATARIA-TERREBONNE NATIONAL ESTUARY PROGRAM -- continued

pants are included on the committees, including: government officials, from parish-level to agency heads; academicians; landowners; sugar and cattle growers; representatives from levee boards, planning committees, environmental organizations, and the oil and gas industry.

PRESENT STATUS & OUTLOOK

The first phases of the effort (identifying and characterizing stresses) are nearly complete, and a draft Comprehensive Conservation Management Plan is due in the Fall of 1995.

Factors Facilitating Progress

The committee structure has been a significant benefit: committees and their members have worked well together. The committee function has extended beyond simply serving as sounding boards for conflicting interests. Being inclusive of all interests from the program's inception has helped foster respect among stakeholders, with the effort benefiting from significant stakeholder support as a result. Another benefit has been the small size of the coordinating office -- nine staff -- allowing for

reduced "red tape" and greater flexibility and assistance among personnel in carrying out their responsibilities. Finally, the program's coordinators consider this effort to be far more open than other state or federal projects, with greater representation from local government and citizens, both of whom traditionally have not been included in planning processes.

Obstacles to Progress

While essential to the effort's progress, the five committees present another layer of bureaucracy in a planning process, leading to coordination issues between committees and with EPA, for example. Identifying the program's needs has taken longer than anticipated. Consequently, some deadlines approved by EPA at the project's inception have been difficult to meet and are perhaps inflexible because they are difficult to change or no longer appropriate.

In the future, funding will be a limiting factor, primarily because there is no federal funding guaranteed by EPA beyond the planning phases. Implementation and securing funding invariably must be assumed by the state. Whereas

specific project funds are potentially available under different statutes (e.g., water treatment facilities under the Clean Water Act), securing those funds is a long process that does not necessarily consider broader project needs. To a great degree, the program's continuation will depend on the state's legislature, which may only consider the program on a year-to-year basis. Conflict between stakeholders may arise with the development of specific management strategies, when all stakeholders may have to make compromises. Finally, conflicting agency goals and mandates have been cited as another obstacle.

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