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BUILDING A HURRICANE RESISTANT COAST

A COMPREHENSIVE HURRICANE PROTECTION STRATEGIC PLAN FOR LOUISIANA

A POSITION PAPER

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Sustainable hazards mitigation requires that engineered solutions be used wisely and in balance with other approaches to enhance resiliency, environmental quality, economic vitality, intra- and inter-generational equity, and quality of life.
Mileti 1999

For generations Louisiana's sons and daughters have lived in the Nation's largest "working coast". Our families remain in long established enclaves significantly inland from the Gulf of Mexico. We make a living by fishing, trapping, working in the oil industry, or providing support services to these coastal oriented activities. Unfortunately, the rhythm of the sea, a need for protection against Mississippi River floods, and a support of the national demand for nonrenewable resources have accelerated the natural, destructive geologic processes and hindered the rebuilding wetlands and barrier islands. In other states, cities crowd the Atlantic beaches. Vacation resorts surround the Gulf of Mexico. Ocean front homes perch on cliffs facing the Pacific sunset. We are unlike our neighbors who chose to move in harms way. We regularly abandon communities and retreat inland, only to have the Gulf of Mexico get closer to our homes and industries.

Louisiana because of its subtropical latitude on the east side of the continent ranks as one of the states most vulnerable to hurricanes. A flat landscape and low elevations (less than 12 ft above sea-level and up to 100 miles from the Gulf of Mexico) place approximately half of the state's population at extreme risk. As years pass, the potential for catastrophe increases. Barrier islands and coastal wetlands erode, eliminating their buffering effect on storm surge and magnifying the impact of open water conditions on hurricane protection levees and increasing the need for levees where none were needed before. Historically, responses to or preparation for hurricanes has been to deal with issues separately. On the one hand, Federal and state agencies work to restore, replace, or enhance the renewable resource values of barrier islands and coastal wetlands. At the same time, sections within these same agencies may be studying hurricane protection structures (with or without augmenting interior drainage systems) which potentially conflict with restoration projects. In addition, agencies and local governments plan evacuation routes and design drainage networks that can limit the opportunities for enhanced hurricane protection. As a consequence, the state lacks a process for assuring that Federal and state levee projects, evacuation routes, coastal restoration projects, navigation canals, and local activities within the coastal zone do not interfere with or prohibit each other. Project costs are too high not to be taking steps that reduce conflicts. State government must act because investing in a strategic plan has tangible returns that increase over time. With proper planning many of these projects produce mutual benefits.

As Louisiana moves into the 21st Century, the state will take charge of its destiny by developing and implementing a COMPREHENSIVE HURRICANE STRATEGY. In other words, government will shift from a practice concerned with achieving a single goal by whatever means and regardless of the consequences to one that takes a long-term perspective. The Comprehensive Hurricane Strategy will pursue this approach by including (integrating) a multiplicity of activities, projects, and programs from many agencies that focus on hurricane impacts. At the same time, the CHS will establish methods for bringing into harmony diverse activities, projects, and programs, thereby reducing waste, duplication, and conflict. A comprehensive strategic approach enables authorities to make better decisions and enhance services to the public.

The COMPREHENSIVE HURRICANE STRATEGY encompasses four elements. First, the Governor's Office will initiate an aggressive process to position the state to make better decisions concerning hurricane related projects either in place or anticipated for the coastal zone. Second, the Comprehensive Hurricane Strategy provides for disseminating information about hurricane related projects to the public and local governments. Third, the Comprehensive Hurricane Strategy will investigate consolidating the financing of projects to eliminate the need for redesigning or rebuilding infrastructure. Finally, the Comprehensive Hurricane Strategy will emphasize creating a hurricane resistant coast. Goals and objectives for the Comprehensive Hurricane Strategy are attached.

Teamwork is essential to accomplishing the strategy because the ultimate product must meet the needs and expectations of the people of coastal Louisiana. As a result of the CHS, state and federal administrators must be able to efficiently make well-informed decisions within the limited financial resources available for any given program. Eventually, the Strategy will influence significant budget allocation decisions for the long-term protection of coastal residents and the basic coastal ecological systems. Once a strategy is implemented, state managers will be able to monitor a program's results and initiate adjustments to continuously improve the way government does business. The Governor's Office of Coastal Activities will organize the development of the Louisiana Comprehensive Hurricane Protection Strategic Plan. The process begins in December 1999.

REFERENCE

Mileti, D. S. 1999 Disasters by Design. A Reassessment of Natural Hazards in the United States. Washington, D.C.: Joseph Henry Press. p.161.