

Testimony

House Committee on Natural Resources

Rigs to Restoration: Examining the Gulf Coast Restoration through Energy Production and Permitting

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Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today. My name is Kyle Graham, former Executive Director of Louisiana's Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority – the agency responsible for planning and implementing one of our country's first and most innovative coastal master planning efforts. As a current resident of Colorado, it is truly wonderful to be back in coastal Louisiana and I am grateful to have all of you here today to see this unique place for yourselves.

From some of the country's busiest ports and most productive fisheries, to diversified energy production and recreation – our "sportsman's paradise" encompasses so much more than just a beautiful landscape. Coastal Louisiana plays a strategic role in energy production and represents billions in economic stimulus each year on a global scale.

However, this invaluable asset continues to decline and is experiencing some of the fastest rates of land loss in the world. Decades of studies and analysis tell us that Coastal Louisiana can be sustained, but it must be maintained.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the State of Louisiana took the first of many monumental steps forward in aggressively addressing our land loss problem. By creating the Louisiana Coastal Protection Restoration Authority, our leaders laid the blueprint for a coordinated and strategic effort to comprehensive coastal management. CPRA was established as the single state entity with authority to articulate a clear statement of priorities and to implement an integrated approach to protection and restoration – which is documented in Louisiana's Coastal Master Plan.

The State also prioritized allocating substantial funding to developing our Coastal Master Plan, including conducting research, gathering and analyzing data, and developing tools that better inform the types and timing of a comprehensive coastal planning effort. The Coastal Master Plan is required to be updated every six years, and relies on the extensive network of coastal monitoring stations and consistently updated modeling tools. It also is rooted in extensive stakeholder outreach, inclusive of the wide range of community members that value what coastal Louisiana has to offer. This information is used in an extensive planning process to develop the best and most cost-effective combination of projects that would lead to a stronger, more resilient, and more sustainable coast.

With an actionable plan in place, this effort has enabled Louisiana to successfully obtain funding from a wide variety of revenue sources. Over the last 17 years, the lean agency has successfully overseen the implementation and completion of more than \$14 Billion in projects. In this fiscal year alone, they are authorized to spend \$1.71 Billion.

Successful implementation relies on a wide variety of funding sources and strategic decision-making to leverage each dollar for maximum benefit. It's been a successful approach to date, but this approach presents some challenges:

1. **Reliable and robust funding.** Each year the State approves an annual spending plan that includes projected three-year schedules, based on anticipated funding and established priorities, for all active projects. The revenues from the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act continue to be a significant part of the State's plans. Uncertainty in currently authorized, revenue will cause project delays, disruptions in reliable jobs, halt progress on effective projects needed urgently, and increase the cost of each individual projects. Conversely, increasing that revenue stream would expedite essential project outcomes. To increase effectiveness of GOMESA and other Federal Grant Programs, the Committee should consider ways to provide consistent and reliable revenue and other securities that will minimize or offset disruptions to GOMESA funding. As I previously stated, these projects aren't just for Louisiana's benefit. Our ports represent billions in energy production, significant import and export activities, and the largest commercial fishery in the U.S. that accounts for much of our nation's seafood supply.
2. **Permitting Timelines:** Projects are selected as part of an comprehensive plan built so that projects work in unison, furthering the benefits of each individually. However, short-term changes to the already declining marine environment and estuaries provides the foundation for a more sustainable outlook and healthier ecosystem long-term. When fully implemented, the projects work in concert. However, regulatory and resource agencies often evaluate project permitting on an individual basis and fail to assess the comprehensive benefits and big picture of a cohesive suite of projects. Differing perspectives and unclear guidelines lead to extensive and often unnecessary reviews and project amendments which ultimately increases the time and costs to deliver each project. The Committee should consider processes to accept regionally adopted plans and define how agencies should collectively evaluate the individual projects as part of the overall plan.
3. **Management of the Mississippi River:** The State's Coastal Master Plan includes a suite of coastal restoration projects, the majority of which are being implemented to mitigate for lack of sediment delivery and other negative impacts associated with ongoing operations of the Mississippi River. River levees and dredging operations successfully route Mississippi River sediment through the river channel to effectively maintain a vitally important shipping channel. However, shunting the freshwater and sediment supply from the Mississippi River's deltaic plain has led to the rapid decline of Louisiana's coast. Turning a growing deltaic area into one that has lost of 2,000 square miles since the 1930's. In response, Louisiana's Coastal Master plan calls for sediment pipelines and diversions, projects designed to mimic the natural land building processes that historically built our state, and built the land we stand on today. To maintain ongoing benefits, these projects will require future operations and maintenance funding. And just as coastal Louisiana enables industry, wildlife, transportation and more to exist in harmony, we should prioritize funding for projects that support restoration without risking other protection or transportation measures. The Committee should consider ways to offset the impacts to coastal Louisiana by paying the State for future implementation or operations of relevant coastal projects that restore and rebuild this critical landscape.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.