

Statement of Steve Cochran
Former Director, RESTORE the Mississippi River Delta Coalition
before the House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries
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Chairman Bentz, Ranking Member Huffman, and members of the Committee, my name is Steve Cochran, and I am pleased to appear before you today to discuss the draft legislation being developed by Congressman Graves. I very much appreciate his commitment, and the Committee's interest in further investment in the protection and restoration of our nation's coastal resources. This afternoon I will share my perspectives on the draft legislation, within the context of the threats to those resources, particularly in the Lower Mississippi River Watershed and the Louisiana coast, and including the implications for communities, natural resources, and our nation's economy. Thank you for the opportunity to be here.

Background

You will notice that my title begins with the word "former". That should help make clear that I am here today in my own capacity, having retired from a 39-year career in the public and nonprofit sectors in 2023. With that retirement, from a policy perspective I no longer speak for anyone. In front of this committee, I'm a free man.

By way of background: over those 39 years I have worked in several policy and political roles for state and federal officials, but for the majority of them I worked at both local and national levels for environmental advocacy groups.

Within that, I think my experience most relevant for today's discussion began in 2014, when I took on the national role of managing Coastal Resilience for the Environmental Defense Fund. Within that work, I later took on the additional role of Executive Director for Restore the Mississippi River Delta, a Louisiana-based coalition comprising five advocacy groups - 3 national and 2 local.

The Need for Action – Louisiana Coast and Beyond

From that perspective, I want to offer a few overarching thoughts before focusing on the intent and specifics of Congressman Graves’s welcome discussion draft:

- What happens in the Louisiana coastal zone has tremendous significance to the rest of the country — its ports, energy production, fisheries, agriculture, and culture are of national value and significance. Here are some of the measurements of that significance, as described by the State’s Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, the agency charged with safeguarding these assets:

“Nearly two million people reside in the area we call America’s Wetland, many of whom have made their lives and livelihoods in close proximity to Louisiana’s coast. Our wetlands act as a buffer to protect these citizens and their cherished communities from storm surge.

Additionally, Louisiana plays a vital role in the economic infrastructure of America, with our ports carrying 20 percent of all US waterborne commerce, providing 26 percent (by weight) of commercial fisheries landings, and supplying 18 percent of our nation’s oil. The impact to our nation’s energy and economic security will be devastating if we fail to act.

Louisiana’s wetlands also provide winter habitat for more than five million migratory waterfowl and offers stopover habitat for millions of neotropical migratory birds.

The coast’s intrinsic value, as a working coast, home to millions of citizens, and natural habitats makes it one of the nation’s most unique and valuable landscapes.”¹

¹ <https://coastal.la.gov/our-plan/2023-coastal-master-plan/> “What’s At Stake”

- The national significance of this coastline does not stop there. Well over three-quarters of ALL freshwater flows from rivers and streams throughout the U.S. flow through Louisiana into the Gulf. In terms of port traffic, five of the nation's 15 busiest ports are found here, and every day that natural or human-caused disasters shut down navigation here, America loses \$300 million. These national assets rely on the area's renowned coastal wetlands, which themselves represent an essential national treasure that hosts crucial fish and wildlife habitat, irreplaceable natural wonders, and unparalleled outdoor experiences, opportunities for sportsmen and women, and a vibrant tourism economy.
- Just as the Louisiana coast plays a unique role in America's commercial and ecological health, so does this area offer a unique window on coastal land loss and climate threats to coastal resources, and on the risk all of that poses to coastal communities and ecosystems. Each year, between 25 and 35 square miles of coastal Louisiana simply disappears into the open waters of the Gulf of Mexico, laying claim to some of America's most vital wetland habitat even as it endangers key infrastructure for our national economy. Some 30 percent of all wetlands in the Lower 48 are found here; in terms of annual wetland loss in America, though, Louisiana accounts for fully 90 percent of the damage. And each year, the stakes become greater – and the potential consequences to Louisiana lives, property, and resources, and to the nation's economic vitality, grow more dire – as these losses, now exacerbated by sea level rise, continue. We simply cannot afford to wait, and so again I want to express my appreciation for this effort to add new legislative solutions to the current mosaic of investments aimed at reversing land loss and restoring the coast.
- As important as these resources and investments are, I recognize that the Louisiana coast is far from the only ecosystem facing mounting threats ranging from poor resource management decisions to extreme weather events, sea level rise, and other climate-related challenges. I want to encourage all of us to keep that in mind over the next several years as the needs for federal support of coastal and watershed resilience

increase. Congress has already made significant place based commitments – with billions in associated spending – to restoring threatened coastal areas, the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) authorized over 20 years ago in the 2001 Water Resources Development Act to the Chesapeake Bay Program dating all the way back to 1983, to the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) established in 2009. I would respectfully note that the surpassing value of Louisiana’s coast to the nation, and the “code red” threat level this national asset faces, warrant a similarly focused congressional response.

- Again, these kinds of requests from around the country are only just beginning - climate driven sea level rise and extreme weather patterns are disrupting coastlines and watersheds all around the world, and certainly in the United States. These climate driven changes and damages are also disrupting economic patterns, including insurance costs and availability, and infrastructure in ways that are inevitably arriving at governments doorsteps. My experience, and therefore advice, is that the Congress fully engage in this discussion and policy-making now, before it has to take the form instead of purely reactive and even more expensive disaster response. And that is part of what this bill begins to do, building on previous Congressional efforts.

Proposed Lower Mississippi River Watershed Legislation

The Graves discussion draft offers a crucial opportunity to bring much-needed federal focus and financial capacity to the Louisiana coast’s race against time. The bill’s primary focus is the authorization of a new federal grant program, to be administered by the National Marine Fisheries Service, to advance coastal protection and restoration projects. I’d like to take a moment to describe the needs for this kind of federal funding infusion, and how it would fit into the context of other existing funding streams.

As many of you may know, as a result of the Deepwater Horizon (DWH) disaster Louisiana will ultimately receive a total of \$8 billion in settlements and penalties, paid out over 16 years, that can be used for

coastal restoration and protection. The cost of that funding is probably \$100 billion dollars in oil spill damages to its coast, and at least 11 deaths. It is the worst way imaginable to fund anything, and it only begins to address the specific losses associated with DWH.

That funding, plus additional support from smaller sources such as GOMESA, the Breaux Act, and other federal, state and local sources allowed a jump start in what is conservatively estimated to cost over \$50 billion, plus annual operations and maintenance support. This jump start was possible because Louisiana, under its Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, already had a plan in place before the money was available. Louisiana's Coastal Master Plan process is truly a science-based model for the nation, identifying and prioritizing a broad array of projects and approaches to address the crisis facing coastal communities and resources. As of today, the state's plan is now effectively using over \$1 billion per year, producing so far:

- 157 projects since 2007
 - An average of 10,000 jobs each year
 - 383 miles of levee improvement,
 - 71.6 miles of barrier island restoration, and
 - 105 square miles of habitat benefits (67,200 acres)

The projects and investments under the Coastal plan are estimated to result in \$10.7-\$14.5 billion in avoided annual economic damages. The plan, and the use of this funding, has so far been a real success story.

Now, here is the challenge. This \$8 billion disaster-fueled funding will take us only through another 8 years, at best. That is not enough money, nor does it buy enough time, for Louisiana to put the policies and projects in place to sustain its coastline. It is absolutely critical that we begin establishing the funding structures to support the continuation of the work in coastal Louisiana as soon as possible, so that planning, policies, projects identified in the Master Plan and related annual plans can move at the fastest possible speed. This bill or something like it could be a huge step forward, and I enthusiastically support the \$500 million commitment this legislation proposes.

I view the funding approach in the bill as a smart and affordable step forward, and given that Louisiana already has a plan in place, and mechanisms for managing project funding, the state could take advantage of such funding immediately. It really is folly to wait around until inevitable natural disasters bring a “flood” of needs and fiscal demands for Congress to address, including restoration and protection projects that will only grow in costs and number. There is, perhaps, still some time to get ahead of this. It has long been understood that money spent ahead of a flood will return its investments at an average 6-1 rate. The bill offers a specific way to realize those returns, and it may be a model for a more national approach for necessary federal attention as these kinds of coastal and watershed needs are growing around the country.

I would also note that setting up a program like this at NOAA seems to make sense, as they have the requisite experience at both federal and local levels to manage it. Recognizing that the bill is still in its discussion-draft phase, I would encourage others to offer comments on administration of the proposed new program.

Finally, I would highlight two provisions in the draft bill – related to the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) and to Essential Fish Habitat consultations under section 305(b)(2) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act – that warrant further discussion among a broader set of affected constituencies and informed experts.

Time is indeed of the essence when it comes to safeguarding critical natural defenses, ecological treasures, and communities from the next inevitable disaster. That said, balancing those urgencies with longstanding statutory commitments to environmental protections, integrated community benefits, and true public engagement is hard. I am a longtime member of the environmental community, where these statutes are often referred to as “bedrock” protections, and in fact many of our challenges in the Lower Mississippi River watershed are in part a result of not having such protections in place before NEPA was in operation. In that context, it may be surprising to hear me willing to even consider new ways to expedite project reviews while maintaining the underlying integrity of those vital public processes. I do so not without worry, but with a firm belief that pragmatic discussion is not only worthwhile but necessary, and I would argue that now is that time to truly wrestle with these challenges. I look

forward to joining that broader conversation as this important legislation for the Louisiana coast is considered.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these thoughts and perspectives. I'll be glad to answer any questions.