

Buyouts possible as Corps mulls controversial hurricane strategies

Corps of Engineers offers "serious proposal" for buyouts, relocation of coastal property

*Rob Young, Ph.D.
Special to The Clarion-Ledger
March 22, 2009*

IT'S OFFICIAL — relocating coastal property is more cost effective than trying to protect that property by building artificial beaches.

Recently, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers released its proposed projects for the Mississippi Coastal Improvements Program. The MCIP was initiated following Hurricane Katrina to "reduce the vulnerability of the region."

There are portions of this plan with which I disagree, but those disagreements are overshadowed by the fact that the Corps is finally proposing to buy out coastal properties and relocate public infrastructure. To my knowledge, this is the first time that the Corps has included a serious proposal for relocating property away from significant coastal hazards, rather than simply attempting to protect property with expensive coastal engineering like sea walls or massive beach nourishment.

The cost and benefit summary in the MCIP speaks volumes. A proposal to "restore" the undeveloped barrier islands of the Gulf Islands National Seashore would cost an estimated \$477 million. The benefits to the mainland shoreline are estimated at only \$17.6 million per year in possible storm damage reduction.

So, we would spend almost half a billion in federal tax dollars and we would break even after 30 years (if the restoration is a success). From a scientific perspective, I am dubious about the storm surge reduction benefits of the restoration, and I am also philosophically opposed to the use of a national park as an engineered storm buffer.

Yet, in the same document we are presented with a far more enlightened proposed project - termed the High Hazard Area Risk Reduction Program.

The centerpiece of this project would be the purchase of approximately 2,000 properties located in the most vulnerable locations.

The costs of this project are much smaller, at an estimated \$187million to \$397 million, while the benefits are significantly larger at \$22 million to \$33 million per year. This plan could pay for itself in less than six years.

Even better, the benefits are guaranteed and long-lasting. When the property at risk is gone, it is gone forever. In contrast, the barrier island restoration project simply cannot guarantee protection and does nothing to get anyone out of harm's way. This is a giant step in the right direction for sensible coastal management, for fiscal responsibility, and for environmental protection. I hope that the residents of the Mississippi Gulf Coast - in fact, all the citizens of Mississippi - will embrace this voluntary buyout and relocation proposal.

Relocation of property and infrastructure away from eroding shorelines and high hazard areas should become the official Corps policy. Relocation of property is a viable (if not popular) alternative to the building of seawalls and beach renourishment, especially in communities with a low density of development.

Holding the line against coastal erosion will become increasingly difficult and costly as sea level rise accelerates. There is understandable concern within local coastal communities regarding the loss of tax base if oceanfront homes are moved or if oceanfront lots are lost. Yet few, if any, studies have been conducted examining the potential benefits of relocating critical infrastructure away from an eroding shoreline.

The benefits may outweigh the losses in many cases. These benefits can include: substantial savings for taxpayers, preservation of the recreational beach (the main economic resource for many tourist towns), an increase in the value of remaining properties, reduced future risk from storm damage, and a lighter load for emergency managers.

The benefits are rarely considered by local communities in planning for their future. Beach nourishment, the currently preferred method of fighting coastal erosion, is becoming increasingly expensive.

In the future, beaches will need more sand, more frequently. The sand resources are simply not available to fight this battle into the 22nd century.

In light of this, relocation may begin to seem like a more reasonable option.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is to be congratulated for pursuing a policy that may not be popular with the Mississippi congressional delegation, but one that should be embraced by the majority of concerned American taxpayers.

Both fiscal conservatives and environmentalists alike should applaud this plan.

It will save billions in tax dollars over the years. It will protect the coastal environment.

And, it just might save lives, as well. It is the only viable long-term solution for the flood-prone Coast of Mississippi.

I wish the Corps would take the same approach in coastal Louisiana, an area even more vulnerable with problems even more expensive to fix.

Additional Facts

What is the Miss. COastal Improvement Program?

The hurricanes of 2005 caused an unprecedented level of destruction within the Gulf region of the U.S., most notably in the states of Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi. Significant coastal storm events impacting the Gulf region in 2005 included:

- Hurricane Cindy, which made landfall in Mississippi on July 6 near Waveland.
- Hurricane Katrina, which made landfall on August 29 on the Louisiana-Mississippi border.
- Hurricane Rita, which made landfall on September 24 between Sabine Pass, Texas, and Johnsons Bayou, La.

During Hurricane Katrina coastal Mississippi was the point of impact of the greatest tidal surge that has hit the mainland of the U.S. in its recorded history.

Hurricane Katrina affected over 90,000 square miles of the Gulf Coast region and caused almost complete destruction of several large coastal communities, and seriously damaged numerous others.

Congress authorized the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 2005 to initiate two important and related comprehensive planning efforts to address the devastation caused by the coastal storms of 2005:

- The Mississippi Coastal Improvements Program.(MCIP).
- The Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration (LCPR).

Taken together, these two planning efforts are intended to develop system-wide solutions to assist the multi-state region of the U.S. Gulf Coast in recovering from the devastation caused by storm events and to provide greater resiliency towards future storm events.

The Mississippi Coastal Improvements Program's Comprehensive Plan and Integrated Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement is intended to identify near and long term strategies to reduce the vulnerability of the region to a recurrence of similar natural disasters.

SOURCE: The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Miss. Coastal Improvements Program