

Will rebuilt wetlands save us? Or is it time to move?

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THIBODAUX — Isidore and Lili, Katrina and Rita, Gustav and Ike.

As each pair of storms brought unexpected flooding to portions of Terrebonne and Lafourche, officials renewed their calls to restore the wetlands that once buffered their coastlines against storm surge.

But a North Carolina researcher says the wetland-restoration battle cry might provide false hope to endangered communities and prevent effective planning for their futures.

Relocation might be the only option for many coastal communities that find themselves flooding every few years, said Robert Young, director of the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines at Western Carolina University.

“Make no mistake, I think that wetland restoration is a worthy goal,” he said.

“But show me the scientific evidence that suggests that we will be able to put the wetlands back on the scale needed to reduce storm impacts.”

Even as Louisiana goes ahead with large-scale plans to restore its coast, Young said, state leaders should simultaneously be planning retreat strategies for the most vulnerable coastal areas.

“Just because you want to start planning it doesn’t mean you have to do it,” Young said. “To refuse to even consider it because you never want to have to do it is just not fair or safe to the people of Louisiana in the long run.”

Young will present these recommendations, including in a paper he wrote with 26 leading coastal scientists and engineers, Tuesday at a convention of geologists in Houston.

NOT A NEW ISSUE

Simone Maloz, executive director of Restore or Retreat, a Thibodaux-based coastal-advocacy group, said relocation always pops up as a topic after significant storms slam the area.

And after each storm, more and more residents make retreat a personal issue, leaving flooded homes for higher ground.

The reason people stay, she said, is a combination of optimism and reality as they see some of these restoration projects begin to work.

“I think that’s just because we’re living in the glass, and we have to think it’s half-full,” she said.

In sharp contrast, Young argues that Louisiana’s delta is too unstable to restore completely due to a number of complex factors — the reining in of the river that created it, sinking land and rising sea level.

The best we can probably do is hold the line, Young said, and he doesn’t think people are being told that.

“I’m afraid that over the long term this is a losing battle,” Young said.

Not acknowledging the great and dismal nature of this problem endangers the lives of people in coastal Louisiana, he added.

Young said he knows his message will provoke the ire of many Louisiana scientists, but that it’s necessary to speak out.

MORE THAN WETLANDS

Louisiana scientists counter that Young needs to take a closer look at large-scale plans under way to protect coastal residents.

“We know wetlands are not going to stop a Category 5 hurricane and provide storm-surge protection from that,” said Robert Twilley, a coastal scientist with Louisiana State University. “Wetlands do provide a service, and there is a degree of surge reduction provided that we do not get today.”

Wetlands could protect against the lower-scale, high-frequency floods that Terrebonne and Lafourche have seen more and more often in recent decades, Twilley added.

“For 4,000 years there were hurricanes, subsidence and sea-level rise and that delta did very well, thank you. The difference is us,” Twilley said.

Continued sea-level rise in the face of a degrading delta will cause more problems for Louisiana residents, he said, but “that’s why we need to see large-scale change.”

Twilley says it is possible to rebuild degraded wetland and maintain them if we change the way we manage the Mississippi River. Wetlands need to be fed by water from river offshoots they’ve been cut off from for decades.

The problem, he said, is whether the humans who reined in the river in the first place are ready to make such a correction.

“In order to replace that system that we’ve lost and minimize continued degradation, it will require huge changes to the way we manage the river,” he said. “Will we do that? I haven’t seen the evidence yet.”

Twilley said Louisiana’s master plan, which combines multiple strategies for levee protection, rebuilding natural ridges and barrier islands as well as restoration needs to be considered.

“I do think other projects, like trying to rebuild the barrier islands, maybe will offer a little more protection,” Young said. “But still, it’s a drop in the bucket compared to the problem we’re facing.”

And you have to question whether environmental engineering of the scale that would be necessary is feasible, Young said.

“You can try to wall off all of southern Louisiana, but that’s going to be an expensive activity,” Young said.

Though he expresses a belief the coast can be saved, Twilley said the clock is running out for some lower-bayou communities like Isle de Jean Charles, where discussions of relocation have again emerged.

“Doing nothing is no longer an option. That community down there has suffered to where it’s at the brink of some real tough decisions,” Twilley said.

For Twilley, that means figuring out ways to pipe water over long distances from the Atchafalaya River into Terrebonne.

For other scientists, like Kerry St. Pe’, that means funneling mud and river sediment into degrading wetlands to recreate land and mimic the river’s natural land-building properties.

Neither is ready to wave the white flag just yet. But both acknowledge the situation is getting urgent.

“Our number one priority should be to correct our mistakes that were made,” Twilley said. “People developed this land based on the fact that there was this large buffer between us and the Gulf, and we have been wronged by those mistakes.”