

The Case Against Constructing \$400 Million Sand Barriers Off the Louisiana Coast

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FastCompany.com
Thu Jun 3, 2010

Location of proposed sand barriers



Government officials are racing against time to stop the growing Gulf oil slick from destroying the fragile Louisiana wetlands, but are they being too hasty in their response? The White House ordered BP this week to pay for the construction of six sand barriers (aka sand berms) off the Louisiana coast in an attempt to protect the wetlands from encroaching oil. When complete, the \$360 million project will consist of 50 miles of

barrier islands that stop even underwater oil from passing through. But not everyone thinks the berms are worth the money, even though it is theoretically easier to clean oil off sand barriers than wetlands.

The big problem, according to Western Carolina University professor Rob Young, is that the berms might not work. The berms won't form a continuous barrier, so there is a strong probability that oil could reach the wetlands anyway, rendering the sand barriers pointless. And the barriers could take many months to build, by which time the majority of Louisiana's wetlands might already be in peril. Young explains his objections in *Yale Environment 360*:

As a coastal geologist who studies coastal storm impacts, it is clear to me that this berm, located just offshore of the barrier islands, will also be extremely susceptible to erosion. Indeed, it will begin to erode immediately upon completion. Even a simple understanding of coastal processes leads one to conclude that this sandy berm could disappear within a few months... The berm also could prevent the flushing of some oil out of the wetlands.

FastCompany.com has had a difficult time getting comments on the project from nonprofits working on the spill, mainly because many of these organizations are working directly with the government. The Environmental Protection Agency also has yet to return our calls.

The government's desire for quick fixes is understandable. After all, the massive oil leak in the Gulf shows no signs of slowing down, so damage control has to be a priority. But does it really make sense to spend nearly \$400 million on barriers that could quickly erode in the event of a large storm or hurricane? We can't stop this oil disaster just by throwing money at it.