

In Louisiana, politics keeps getting in the way of science

By Jarvis DeBerry
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When Louisiana officials argue that the deepwater drilling moratorium imposed by the Obama administration isn't justified, not even by the unprecedented BP oil gusher, they have science on their side. The experts that the Interior Department consulted before imposing the moratorium are adamant that they did not recommend that approach. "A moratorium was added after the final review and was never agreed to by the contributors," the panelists said in a letter last month.

Nothing clarifies a situation like good, unambiguous science. Administration officials clearly thought enough of the panelists to consult them, so Louisiana officials are right to ask President Obama why his administration took a position that doesn't jibe with the panelists' beliefs and recommendations.

There's a problem, though, with Louisiana officials fighting the moratorium with an emphasis on science. The approach leaves them looking hypocritical when scientists say the state's plan to construct oil-blocking sand berms and rock dikes will hurt the coast more than it will help.

As it uses a best-science argument to criticize the federal administration's drilling moratorium, is the Jindal administration willing to accept criticism that its plans for sand berms and rock dikes don't meet scientific rigor? You be the judge:

"No one can convince us that rocks in the water are more dangerous than oil," Jindal said in a speech in New Orleans on Tuesday. "That is absolutely ridiculous. The only people who believe that are the bureaucrats in Washington, D.C., who can't see the oil, smell the oil or touch the oil."

Denise Reed, a wetlands specialist and director of the Pontchartrain Institute for Environmental Sciences, works in New Orleans, not Washington, and she's not a bureaucrat. She told The Times-Picayune the state's plan could result in "additional erosion and more pathways for oil to move in from the Gulf." She told The New York Times, "There was very strong scientific backing for not doing this. This could really devastate our barrier shoreline, our first line of defense."

If the scientists are wrong, the governor and his administration officials ought to be able to counter them in a way that still acknowledges their expertise. But Jindal -- whose Rhodes scholarship is well in his rearview -- seems more interested in playing the role of

the populist anti-intellectual. And one of the first rules of populist anti-intellectualism is to connect an opponent to Washington and accuse him or her of being a dreaded bureaucrat. Jindal seems unconcerned that some of his critics are local scientists and that he's a former bureaucrat himself.

"It's really offensive, I think, and not fair, to call the scientific community bureaucrats," Dr. Ioannis Y. Georgiu, a UNO professor of marine engineering, told The New York Times. "We are being demonized."

Everybody understands the governor's desire to not only do something to protect this state's fragile coastline but to be seen doing something. In politics it is always better to try and fail than to be thought of as passive. But the best political move might not be the best scientific move, and during this continuing crisis, Louisiana needs a governor who never allows the politics to get in the way of the science.

One of the more persistent criticisms of Obama is that his administration ignored the scientists they consulted to preserve the president's political base: environmentalists who are dead-set against off-shore drilling. If Jindal is ignoring scientific recommendations to preserve his political ambitions, then that ought to strike Louisianians as just as bad.

Like Reed and Georgiu, Rob Young, a coastal geologist at Western Carolina University, is not from Washington, and he's not a bureaucrat. He has worked in the Gulf for 20 years and told NPR that he understands Jindal's desperation to do something: "Believe me, I do understand the urgency. I hate being viewed as someone who might be attempting to obstruct the action to protect and save the coast. ... But doing something just to be looking like you're doing something is not the right thing to do."

There's an old bit of legal advice that says, "If you have the facts on your side, pound the facts. If you have the law on your side, pound the law. If you have neither on your side, pound the table."

When it comes to sand and rock barriers to stop BP's oil from washing ashore, Jindal is pounding something, but it sure isn't science. Will his plan subject us to a greater pounding when the next storm moves toward land?