

Photos tell different stories about sand berm effort to block Gulf of Mexico oil spill

By Paul Rioux
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Critics and supporters of building sand berms to shield Louisiana's coast from the Gulf of Mexico oil spill have released dueling photo sequences that alternately show one of the berms washing away or performing precisely as planned, depending on the eye of the beholder.

Former Louisiana State University marine sciences professor Len Bahr said aerial photos taken from June 25 to July 7 show a berm under construction near the Chandeleur Islands "shrinking like a wool sweater in hot water."

"The berm is disappearing and some very expensive construction equipment is drowning in the surf. That can't have been the plan," said Bahr, a leading critic of the BP-funded \$360 million berm project. He's also a former coastal policy adviser to several Louisiana governors, including Bobby Jindal, who championed the berm project.

Jindal's administration released photos taken Tuesday of the same "E-4" berm, which appears significantly larger and has raised edges that are absent from the last two photos in Bahr's sequence.

Jindal said National Guard members have removed more than 500 pounds of "oil and oiled debris" from the berm.

"Clearly the sand berms are doing what they were intended to do," Jindal said at a news conference in New Orleans Wednesday afternoon in which he addressed efforts to combat the spill. "They're trapping the oil before it can get into our wetlands."

After intensive lobbying by Jindal and Plaquemines Parish President Billy Nungesser, the Army Corps of Engineers last month approved emergency permits to build six berms in the Gulf totaling 45 miles at BP's expense.

Jindal and Nungesser said the 6-foot-high berms are critical to help keep oil out of delicate wetlands. But some scientists and federal officials questioned the berms' effectiveness and warned about unintended environmental consequences.

Bahr posted several photos on his website that appear to show the E-4 berm eroding over a 12-day period as heavy equipment, including a bulldozer, becomes partially submerged.

Bahr said he received the photos from federal officials who he said asked not to be identified.

"This whole thing has gotten so political that they're concerned about retribution," he said. "But I'm absolutely confident the photos are legitimate."

Several of the photos also appear in a "stakeholder update" prepared July 9 by the Army Corps of Engineers. The document gives a brief update on the berm project but does not comment on the apparent erosion of the E-4 berm at the northern end of the Chandeleur chain.

Some berm supporters have said tides were higher during some of the later photos, which they contend explains why the berm appears smaller.

But Rob Young, a Western Carolina University geosciences professor who wrote an opinion article in the New York Times critical of the berms, said the photos depict clear signs of "erosional scouring."

"You have to be careful about drawing grand conclusions," Young said. "But these pictures show how difficult it is to build these things and keep them there. It's not like Hurricane Katrina ran over them."

Young said the state's more recent photos show that "they've obviously been hard at work rebuilding the berm."

Nungesser, who attended Jindal's news conference, said some sand loss is inevitable until grasses have been planted to limit erosion.

Jindal said he hadn't seen the photos Bahr released. But the governor said the berm is large enough to accommodate "multiple helicopters" and invited members of the news media to tour the site.

"If a hurricane threatens the area, they've got to move all the oil containment equipment out for two weeks," he said. "This sand berm can stay up there 24/7 and stop the oil."

Young said he is unimpressed by the 500 pounds of oily debris collected so far.

"There's no doubt that if you pile up sand in the Gulf, some oil will wash up on it," he said. "The real question is whether you would have been able to capture that oil with traditional methods and used the berm money on a viable coastal restoration project."

Calling the E-4 berm an early sign of success, Nungesser urged the corps to approve the state's full request for 18 more berms totaling another 80 miles.

Young said such a large-scale project would be a futile race against the Gulf's erosional powers.

"If they tried to build all of the berms, the first one would be gone long before they finished the last one," he said.

But Jindal said he is focused on the race to stop the advancing oil, pointing to a picture of oiled debris littering the berm -- oil that the governor said might otherwise have ended up in a coastal marsh.

"A picture is worth a thousand words," Jindal said.

That's one thing upon which both sides can agree.