

Scientists to Thad Allen: Stop 'Massive Re-Engineering' of Gulf Coast

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More than two dozen coastal scientists are asking Thad Allen, who heads the federal oil spill response, to halt coastal engineering projects that are intended to prevent damage from the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Calling the projects ill-conceived and poorly reviewed, the scientists argue in a letter sent this afternoon that the engineering will probably do more harm than good:

Our concern is that the cumulative, long-term impacts of all these projects are not being examined in any scientific or thoughtful way. As individual projects, we believe that they would fail a reasonable scientific evaluation. As a cumulative re-engineering of the US Gulf coast, they become a major problem.

In particular, the scientists are concerned about a project to build sand berms along the Louisiana coast, some of which have already suffered major erosion. Local and state officials have proposed "armoring" the berms to prevent erosion, but the scientists say that could harm habitat. The scientists, led by Robert Young of Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, North Carolina, also criticize a project to fill in a gap on Dauphin Island as poorly designed and ephemeral.

All construction should cease and no new permits issued, the scientists write, until the cumulative impacts have been studied. This could happen quickly, they add. "There is still time to halt the berm project and refocus our energy on fighting the spill with traditional methods," they write. Otherwise, the projects could end up harming efforts to restore the long-term damage suffered by the coastal wetlands.