

## ***Opinion: State should spend coastal money quickly***

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Jan 17, 2017 — Houma — As the state advances coastal restoration and protection projects to address our increasingly urgent land loss crisis, there's a simple way it can do more with the billions of restoration dollars headed our way in the coming decades - spend these funds sooner rather than later.

Our leaders should get this money on the ground as quickly as possible, particularly with marsh creation projects that, at an \$18 billion price tag, comprise the largest category of spending on restoration projects in the state's Coastal Master Plan.

We don't have to tell those in Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes, who have and will continue to experience some of the worst effects of our coastal land loss crisis, that urgent action is required. It's a given that construction costs and inflation increase with every passing year. But what also increases is the amount of wetlands that we lose as critical protection for our communities and businesses and as habitat for wildlife and fisheries. This not only makes our region more vulnerable to damage from storms, but it also makes restoration more expensive and difficult over time.

A new analysis by The Water Institute of the Gulf found that the price tag for restoring an acre of Louisiana wetlands through marsh creation will more than double in the next 20 years. Two of the locations the institute analyzed were in the Terrebonne and Lafourche areas: a project between West Little Lake and Bayou Lafourche due east of Galliano, and another between Bayou du Large and Bayou Grand Calliou southwest of Dulac. In the West Little Lake scenario, costs increase six-fold over the course of 50 years.

This analysis couldn't have come at a better time.

Louisiana's Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority recently released its 2017 Draft Coastal Master Plan. If approved, the plan will serve as a blueprint for the state's coastal restoration and protection work over the next 50 years. Finding every opportunity to save costs on this \$50 billion plan is crucial.

In the next few months, the CPRA and state Legislature will receive public input on the plan. Now is the time to urge state officials to move these and other key projects forward as quickly as possible. The Water Institute analysis shows that in addition to spending restoration dollars quickly, Louisiana can save hundreds of millions of dollars by bonding projects where project construction can't happen in the near term. The analysis found that bonding those revenues to start projects sooner could save the state hundreds of millions of dollars. In one case study, the estimated savings from a project financed by a bond issue exceeded \$180 million - more than double the initial project cost.

A different analysis by The Water Institute found that sediment diversions, projects that take sediment from the Mississippi and other rivers and return it to surrounding wetlands to sustain and build land, could increase the life span of a nearby marsh creation project by up to 30 years. So by moving funding and implementing marsh creations projects sooner, leveraging bonding and pairing marsh creation with sediment diversions and other key projects, our state can save money and extend the lifespan of these projects.

The CPRA should be commended for making significant progress in addressing Louisiana's land loss crisis, particularly in rebuilding barrier islands and strengthening levees so important to Terrebonne and Lafourche. Now is the time to keep going - and quickly.

There is no more urgent issue facing our state than to restore our coastal wetlands - and that means putting every restoration dollar to work rapidly. Doing so will help protect our people, our communities, our jobs and way of life.

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