

Long before the first European explorers set foot on the Louisiana coast, residents of what is now the Netherlands already were dealing with problems caused by high water and low land elevation.

Those lessons, learned over hundreds of years, are what state officials hope can be shared as part of a new agreement between the Water Institute of the Gulf, a nonprofit research outfit formed in 2011 and based in Baton Rouge, and its Dutch counterpart, Deltares.

The six-page agreement, signed last week in the Netherlands and unveiled Monday, lists seven areas in which scientists from the two organizations will collaborate: water resource planning, coastal dynamics, nature-based solutions to coastal problems, sediment strategies, managing watersheds, improved modeling and real-time levee monitoring, the officials said.

Details on what exactly the two groups of scientists will do together remain to be worked out. They could include a collaboration under which Deltares, which operates an affiliate in Maryland called Deltares USA, might put staff full-time in Louisiana. But the agreement also contemplates a possible deeper partnership: Deltares USA and the Water Institute could merge, said Justin Ehrenwerth, president and CEO of the Water Institute.

"This gives us an opportunity to take our science to the next level," Ehrenwerth said. "We are bringing some of the greatest minds in the world together."

Deltares USA President Toon Segeren said the collaboration could result in greater knowledge about coastal issues. "It's not for revenue but for knowledge," he said.

Deltares is also a research institution that pursues applied solutions, he added. It has similar agreements with a university in Singapore and a governmental agency in Indonesia, he said.

Regardless of the exact arrangements, Segeren said he expects that Deltares scientists would be in Louisiana frequently and vice-versa.

This agreement is not the first signed between the two organizations, but previous ones have been far more limited in scope.

Gov. John Bel Edwards lauded the partnership between the two agencies, saying it shows the growing prominence of Louisiana researchers in coastal and water-related fields.

The agreement comes at both an exciting and frustrating time for Louisiana coastal policy makers.

The Legislature this year overwhelmingly passed the 2017 Master Plan, a five-year revision of the state's blueprint for addressing rapidly disappearing coastal land and protecting communities from flood events. That plan, which lists dozens of projects that could be built over the next 50 years, was widely lauded across the spectrum, from industry to environmental groups.

At the same time, one of the cornerstones of that campaign, sediment diversions, could be bogged down in federal regulatory red tape until 2022. That's according to officials of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which is helping shepherd the first of those projects, known as the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion, through the permitting process.

CPRA Board Chairman Johnny Bradberry has called that delay "unacceptable," and state officials, including the governor, have repeatedly asked federal officials to help speed up the process.

President Donald Trump's administration has given conflicting signals when it comes to the federal approach to coastal restoration. On the one hand, it has prioritized infrastructure spending and said it wants to reduce federal regulation, including in the permitting process.

On the other hand, the federal budget proposed by the president would end an agreement under which the federal government shares revenue from drilling in the Gulf, a program known as the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act.

GOMESA funds were expected to bring \$420 million into Louisiana over the next three years, all of which would be dedicated to coastal projects. Several members of Louisiana's congressional delegation said they would not vote for a budget that removed GOMESA funding from Louisiana's coast, with Sen. Bill Cassidy calling it a "deal-breaker."