



April 29, 2020

The Honorable John Bel Edwards
Governor, State of Louisiana
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 94004
Baton Rouge, LA 70804

RE: Altering the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet Closure Structure

Dear Governor Edwards,

The MRGO Must Go Coalition has been working since 2006 to restore the ecosystem impacted by the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO) shipping channel. We are writing to express opposition to the proposed opening of the MRGO closure structure, a rock dam at Bayou la Loutre. Science-based decision-making is paramount; a clear understanding of the effects of altering the structure is imperative. The rock dam structure has had significant and measurable benefits for coastal recovery after the closing of the MRGO. Our member organizations and supporters would strongly oppose seeing these benefits lost without well-founded decisions that contribute to the goal of coastal recovery and restoration.

The MRGO was a catastrophic project, destroying and degrading 1.2 million acres of protective marsh, swamps and other bodies of water in the Pontchartrain Basin. This destruction proved deadly as surge along the channel led to decimation of communities during Hurricane Katrina. Some communities along the MRGO, like the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans, are still working to fully recover.

Over a decade of empirical evidence collected by agencies and coastal scientists shows the rock dam to be effective in bringing historical salinity gradients back to over one million acres of coastal habitat – from Maurepas Swamp to the Golden Triangle to Biloxi Marsh. Reopening the flow of water through the MRGO closure would return us to similar conditions that contributed to the degradation of these wetlands.

What do conditions look like on our coast a decade post-closure of the MRGO?

- The closure is helping to revive swamps critical to storm surge protection. In Maurepas Swamp, cypress tree plantings that could not survive pre-closure now see 80% survival rates (very high), according to the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation, which has planted with its partners, including member organization Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, over 36,000 cypress trees in that swamp. These coastal swamps have a renewed ability to thrive.
- *Rangia* clams have returned to the bottom of Lake Borgne. The live clams are important to the health and integrity of the estuary, and the clam shell is an important source of

natural shoreline armoring. While the MRGO was open, the absence of *Rangia* clams exacerbated erosion along the lake's shoreline.

- Oysters are re-established in the area of the historical reefs (pre-MRGO) in Biloxi Marsh, a "critical landscape feature" that helps keep the Gulf of Mexico out of Lake Borgne, thereby reducing storm surge impacts on the levee system. The ability of oysters to re-establish throughout the marsh and for new reefs to be built (which is happening through several ongoing and completed projects) is essential to the integrity of the marsh.
- Ghost forests of massive oak trees along the MRGO are showing astonishing revitalization. For the first time in decades, new growth is appearing on relic trees once thought to be dead, a remarkable sign of rebirth (see attached image).
- Low-salinity vegetation such as Roseau Cane and Three Corner Grass is becoming established once again.
- Some internal channels that were experiencing erosion are now becoming revegetated.
- Some marsh areas are showing high rates of accretion, which is important to offsetting sea level rise.

Furthermore, data also indicate that opening the dam will likely increase local hypoxia in the MRGO due to additional stratification of water in the channel. It will likely also freshen the system seaward of the rock dam and threaten commercial oyster beds that are thriving with the rock dam closure in place.

One of the concerns raised by proponents of opening the MRGO is water quality impacts tied to more frequent openings of the Bonnet Carré Spillway. These impacts largely reflect heavy nutrient loads in the Mississippi River, a problem that should be addressed upstream. The State of Louisiana and the Army Corps of Engineers have both committed to help reduce nutrient loads in the Mississippi River, and impacts from the Bonnet Carré Spillway should provide more impetus to that effort.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, over 70,000 public comments supporting strong restoration efforts in the MRGO ecosystem were submitted to decision-makers. To suggest that we can reopen the MRGO because we have a new levee is reminiscent of the mindset that contributed to the Katrina disaster. We learned after Katrina that we need our coast to protect our levees. With the MRGO closure, we have laid the foundation for future restoration of marsh, swamp, and oyster reefs that provide storm protection to over one million people in the region. Hundreds of millions of dollars in restoration projects are in planning or construction in the MRGO ecosystem area and may be jeopardized by opening the dam. Opening the MRGO would be a gravely irresponsible and harmful decision without rigorous study and mitigation of these potential negative effects.

Thank you for your consideration,

MRGO Must Go Coalition

American Rivers
Citizens Against Widening the Industrial Canal
Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana
Environmental Defense Fund
Global Green

Healthy Gulf
Holy Cross Neighborhood Association
Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation
Levees.org
Louisiana Environmental Action Network
Louisiana Wildlife Federation
Lower Mississippi Riverkeeper
Lower Ninth Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development
Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation
National Audubon Society
National Wildlife Federation
Sierra Club – Delta Chapter

Additional signers:

350 New Orleans
A Community Voice
Audubon Louisiana
Deep South Center for Environmental Justice
G. Paul Kemp, PhD
John W. Day, PhD
Justice & Beyond
lowernine.org

Cc:

Mark Wingate, USACE
Chip Kline, CPRA
Bren Haase, CPRA
Meg Bankston, Office of the Governor
Keith Lovell, DNR

Attachment: Ghost Forest Rebirth

New growth from relic oak trees along Bayou la Loutre Ridge:

