

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE CITIZENS OF LOUISIANA

What if you knew about impending disaster for one of the world’s greatest wildlife and fisheries treasures and you knew there was something that could be done to minimize it? The treasure being lost is Louisiana’s coastal wetlands, which arguably hold the most abundant concentration of fish and wildlife in America. This catastrophic loss is happening and will get worse as long as Louisiana continues its present course. An objective examination of all of our coast and all who depend upon it, now and in the future, reveals that a solution is available: manage the Mississippi River to build new wetlands and create a range of freshwater to saltwater habitats that will provide a home for Louisiana’s fish and wildlife for years, decades and even centuries into the future.

Like many of you, the signers of this letter know all too well what is at stake. We are wetland professionals who share a passion for Louisiana’s natural places and the extraordinary abundance of fish and wildlife it sustains. Our careers are long and diverse: we have worked for decades for land management companies, landowners, consultants, universities, hunting clubs, state and federal agencies and conservation organizations. We trace a proud heritage, going back to luminaries like John James Audubon, who counted Louisiana his favorite place, and who, almost two hundred years ago, marveled at the abundance of wildlife he encountered and set out to record it with his ground-breaking paintings. In addition to our professional work, we hunt, fish and spend much of our leisure time enjoying our state’s coastal wildlife and fisheries. We watch the wetlands convert to shallow water every day, every year. No one wants to save Louisiana’s coastal fish and wildlife more than we do.

We also are witnesses to places on our coast that continue to thrive and that continue to sustain fish and wildlife in abundance. Those are the places where the river is allowed to work its magic as it spreads its life-giving flows and eventually mixes with the Gulf of Mexico. We see today a glimpse of the Louisiana that once was, and that could be again, in the Bird’s Foot Delta of the Mississippi River, in much of the Atchafalaya Basin, and in the deltas forming in Atchafalaya Bay.

Louisiana’s coast contains a range of freshwater through saltwater habitats that, since the first Native Americans settled the coast, have become essential to our way of life. Since before we were born, the Mississippi River has been controlled so that salt water has reduced our heritage and that of our children. The benefits of this straightjacket are tremendous and spread across many economies throughout Louisiana and the nation but the costs are focused here in coastal Louisiana. Disconnected from the river, the abundant fish and wildlife on Louisiana’s coast are becoming merely like that of our neighboring states. Louisiana urgently needs to restore a better balance between wetland building and wetland loss, between freshwater intrusion and saltwater intrusion, and between the river and the sea so that Louisiana’s wildlife, fish, culture, communities and economy will benefit for generations.

Louisiana should not allow exaggerations and speculations regarding the effects of diversions on oysters, shrimp, and speckled trout, etc. to prevent action. In many areas where previous generations grazed cattle and hunted ducks and alligators, commercial and recreational fishermen now harvest oysters, shrimp, and speckled trout because of saltwater intrusion. With or without diversions, salt water will continue to replace fresh water throughout most of coastal Louisiana. Saltwater intrusion has increased, and for decades will continue to increase, fisheries associated with saltwater wetlands throughout most of coastal Louisiana. Eventually however, productive saltwater wetlands subside and become shallow salt water such as found in our neighboring states. Sediment diversions can build new freshwater wetlands that can in the future be allowed to transition to saltwater wetlands and thus support saltwater fisheries for future generations. Wetland-building diversions will not destroy saltwater fisheries but instead will immediately push them farther from some parts of our coast. Unfortunately, this will economically harm some commercial fisherman. As conservationists, it is our job to ensure that healthy and plentiful fish and wildlife populations are available today and for generations to come. We realize that the environmental cost of diversions will be borne by a few Louisianans in this generation whereas the environmental and economic benefits will be spread throughout coastal Louisiana for generations to come. We therefore also recommend an objective exploration of policies to assist affected commercial fishermen to adjust to new diversions.

We believe that Louisiana should not enrich the present generation at the expense of future generations; i.e., we shouldn’t eat our seed corn, we shouldn’t harvest fish and wildlife faster than they can reproduce, and we shouldn’t manage coastal wetlands only for our generation. Louisiana must act now to promote coastal resources for our descendants. We call on Louisiana to continue moving forward with the construction of large scale wetland-building diversions. We call on federal agencies to support Louisiana’s efforts by streamlining project implementation. We call on the citizens of Louisiana to insist that our leaders hold to the plan and move quickly.

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