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A Gulf of Change

By Jeremy Alford

The buccaneers and sea rovers of 19th century Louisiana clung tightly to an area they claimed as their "kingdom by the sea," an untamed wilderness of marsh and cypress and mosquitoes leading out into the Mexican Gulf. They had few problems navigating barges and skiffs through the seemingly endless miles of coastal terrain around Barataria's three islands — Grand Terre, Grand Isle and Cheniere Caminada. Today, commercial fishermen still tell tales about those lost to the maze from either madness or starvation. An odd mix of heavy traffic, confusing waterways and minimal maritime enforcement made for a smuggler's golden age in coastal Louisiana. But that was long before terms such as "land loss," "dredge material" and "marsh erosion" became Cajun colloquialisms. Today, the Barataria system that shielded rogues like the brothers Lafitte is vanishing, if not completely gone. Such is the case with Cheniere Caminada. Nonetheless, there remain privateers that feed off Louisiana's shoreline, only now they're charged with missions paid for and assigned by state government. The immediate aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita sent a flood of fly-by-night contractors and engineers into Louisiana, with many folding as soon as they set up.

Most of that action, fueled largely by federal rebuilding money, has died down, leaving the old regulars — including Bertucci Contracting in New Orleans, Coastal Environments in Baton Rouge and T. Baker Smith in Houma — to resume their regular pace. But another wave of new federal money, possibly as much as \$3 billion annually in coming years, is surging toward coastal Louisiana. Congress has acted more swiftly, relatively speaking, in recent years on authorizations and appropriations, and the state is finally feeling the benefit. Granted, planning and engineering fees have eaten up the early cash flow, but actual construction is forecast to rain down in the near future.

Gov. Bobby Jindal, a Republican, acknowledged the movement in last month's special session by committing \$300 million to coastal restoration and hurricane protection projects. Team Jindal was short on specifics, however, as to how this mega-kitty might be spent. Lawmakers were asked only to deposit the money into a special fund overseen by the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA), Louisiana's guiding coastal agency and the entity authorized to spend the money. In fact, the recent legislation was a scant 188 words in length.

As a result, CPRA can interpret the Legislature's intent and technically is not bound by Jindal's promise that 85 percent of the money will be used for construction — not additional studies — because nothing akin to the governor's vow was actually written into the legislation. To counter concerns that might arise from the arrangement, CPRA chair Garret Graves promises public hearings on the agency's spending plans. He adds that every decision will be made in conjunction with the state-approved master plan for coastal restoration, hurricane protection and flood control, and the final product will be presented to the Joint Legislative Budget Committee. "I think all of us know there will be a great deal of focus on the CPRA's work," Graves says.

The \$300 million purse also places CPRA in a position to serve as a real state agency, as initially intended. But the transition is happening sooner than anyone expected. Scott Angelle, secretary of the Department of Natural Resources, says the panel, which was proposed by former Gov. Kathleen Blanco after the 2005 storms, has suddenly become as "powerful as the LSU Board of

Supervisors or the Superdome Commission." He also admits that some administrative changes are being pondered for the authority during this time of transition, although details are scarce. "We're looking at a few different things," Angelle says, "but it'll hold until next month in the regular session."

While the policy change can wait, attention to the coast cannot. State engineers and geologists contend more than 14 million square yards of shoreline have been eroded this year. In response, the federal government is expected to pump as much as \$15 billion into the dilemma by 2012 — and that's just the first wave of money. As part of the bargain, the state is expected to put up \$1.8 billion of its own money to match the federal expenditures during this time frame. According to Graves, the \$300 million line item in the recent supplemental appropriations bill is a jumpstart to footing the massive note. "This is just an initial payment," he says.

The \$300 million purse is also record-breaking in that it's the largest single state expenditure — proposed or otherwise — dedicated to restoration and protection projects in the history of Louisiana. Supporters say it's an issue that is finally riding a crest, having been bumped into the national spotlight by the 2005 hurricane season. Jindal just happens to be in the right place to go down in Louisiana's history books as the "coastal governor." An important ingredient of that legacy could be a new type of industry focused on coastal challenges, which would partially be located in Baton Rouge where the money is handed out.

While many of the contracting and engineering firms interviewed for this story refused to comment on the record about CPRA's expanding power and the plethora of opportunities it presents, Steven Peyronnin, interim executive director of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, says there are very few who can do the work right. That's why he's expecting another swarm of fly-by-night companies to crop up as the federal money spigot is opened. Just as happened in the wake of Katrina and Rita, the *poseurs* will eventually fold and Louisiana will be left with the local staples and international powerhouses.

In the meantime, university research and business relocations support the notion that Louisiana is creating a new industry, Peyronnin says, proving there's a positive backside in even the direst of situations. It could lead to another golden age for coastal Louisiana, one in which privateers actually do more good than harm.

'Louisiana is already uniquely positioned to become a global leader in this arena," Peyronnin says. "And as the world continues to deal with climate change and how coastal communities will be impacted by climate change and other factors, Louisiana will be the testing grounds for new and innovative ideas."

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