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Price tag sinks plan to bring in mud

Illinois sludge slated to rebuild La. coast

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By Mark Schleifstein
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An ambitious plan to barge mud stuck behind Illinois dams to Louisiana to help rebuild coastal wetlands was canceled because it cost too much, Illinois and Louisiana officials report.

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The project was a victim of rising construction costs after Hurricane Katrina, combined with increased transportation costs resulting from higher fuel prices, officials from both states said Thursday.

The proposal surfaced soon after Katrina during a chance meeting between Mark Davis, the former executive director of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, and Marc Miller, a senior policy adviser to Illinois Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn.

"He had given a presentation (on coastal restoration) to an upper Mississippi River group," Miller said. "I walked up to him and said, 'We've got your mud.'"

Sediment trapped by dams has filled in lakes and the riverbed along 273 miles of the Illinois River between St. Louis and Chicago, Miller said, causing environmental damage and reducing recreation opportunities.

Illinois was looking for ways to remove some of the sediment from Peoria Lake, one of the dam locations on the river, and put it to beneficial use.

Davis brought the idea back to the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources, where officials thought it was a good idea, both because the state needs sediment to rebuild wetlands and because it would be a good way of publicizing Louisiana's wetlands loss to Midwestern residents.

Louisiana contracted with the Army Corps of Engineers' Engineer Research and Development Center to study whether using the mud might spread invasive plant species from Illinois to Louisiana.

The mud got a clean bill of health, according to a report released last week, and it also was found to have no chemical contaminants in testing by the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality.

But the project was canceled after the state Department of Natural Resources received a low bid of \$481,000 to build 1.5 acres of marsh with the mud, said David Frugé, the Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority's project manager. The second-lowest bid was \$679,000.

"We were moving toward implementing this as a small demonstration project, but when the bids came in, we just decided it wasn't worth that kind of money," Frugé said.

Miller agreed. Illinois would have had to pay the cost of shipping the sediment to Louisiana, and rapidly rising fuel costs -- combined with a \$2 billion slashing of Illinois' budget this year -- made the expense prohibitive.

Instead, Illinois trucked the Peoria Lake sediment to a brownfield site in Chicago, where it was used to replace contaminated soil, Miller said.

"We can do it more economically because it's right there," he said.

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