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## EDITORIAL: The pending recovery agenda

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Congress is gearing up to debate a number of important bills, including a vast bailout package to quell the nation's financial crisis, in what could be the session's final week.

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Congressional leaders, however, say they are still committed to addressing the needs of Louisianians and Texans who were still recovering from the 2005 hurricanes and were hit by Hurricanes Gustav and Ike this month. We trust that the urgent needs of storm-battered residents will not be overlooked before Congress adjourns.

There are several Hurricane Katrina recovery issues that have been pending in Congress for months, including aid for hospitals and law enforcement agencies. In addition, Gov. Bobby Jindal last week sent Congress a recovery agenda for Gustav and Ike that includes requests for short-term emergency aid and for a long-term commitment for adequate flood protection and coastal restoration in South Louisiana.

Congress has been generous and responsive to the needs of residents in Louisiana and other Gulf Coast states hit by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita three years ago. Those disasters were made exponentially worse by the failures of the federal levees during Katrina. Now some of those same communities have been pummeled by Gustav and Ike and will need help again.

Many of the worst-hit areas are along coastal Louisiana, which is home to 1.2 million people and helps provide almost a third of the country's energy supply. The recovery of this region is vital to help heal the nation's economy as well.

That's why the Jindal administration spent \$210 million on emergency measures in the first two weeks after Gustav. That figure will grow when other Gustav-related actions and the response to Ike are added.

Louisiana also is spending \$1 billion over the next four years to rebuild its coast and construct levees. That's a formidable investment for a state our size. But a tax base that was still reeling from Katrina and Rita cannot by itself afford the cost of recovery from the most recent storms and make the massive expenditures needed to secure the coast's long-term viability.

That's why Congress' assistance remains crucial. The most urgent need is to provide immediate relief for storm victims and to speed up efforts to restore crucial infrastructure. That includes aid for farmers and fishers, help for hospitals to upgrade generator capabilities and \$100 million to help first responders replace equipment and infrastructure.

Congress also should give the Army Corps of Engineers emergency money to restore waterways vital to the nation's energy supply and commerce. In addition, the state is seeking \$50 million in grants to provide primary care and mental health treatment for affected populations, and another \$100 million to cover the full repair of crucial public facilities in towns that don't have the resources for those expenses.

The nation's economy needs a healthy Louisiana coast to thrive -- and that means more than just rebuilding what Gustav and Ike destroyed.

Congress needs to commit to protecting South Louisiana from 100-year storms by providing funding to finish federally-authorized levee work in the New Orleans metro area and in Lafourche and Terrebonne parishes. It also should speed up delayed work and flood-protection studies in other parts of South Louisiana.

The state will need help as well to restore the coast, perhaps the most important and expensive task to protect our region for the long term. Louisiana's substantial commitment to date is expected to grow when the state gets a much larger share of royalties from oil produced off our coast. Louisiana will get only \$20 million a year until 2017, when royalties will rise to more than \$600 million a year.

Unfortunately, our coast cannot wait until then. Scientists say we have less than 10 years to begin reversing coastal erosion. After that, the damage will be too extensive and too costly to repair -- and that timeline was formulated before Gustav and Ike damaged miles of coastal lands and wetlands.

That's why Louisianians need Congress' help to pay for billions in coastal restoration projects -- some of which already have been authorized by Congress but not funded.

Louisianians are grateful for the assistance Congress has provided since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and for the continued commitment to our state from congressional leaders. But Gustav and Ike have compounded Louisiana's needs and added a sense of urgency -- and we trust Congress will share it.