



Everything New Orleans

The Times-Picayune

EDITORIAL: Not just numbers

Wednesday, September 24, 2008

Louisiana's case for federal help to restore our eroding coast is often made with compelling figures: The coast is home to 1.2 million people. It helps provide roughly one-third of the country's energy supply. Its bounty includes one-fourth of the country's seafood production.

▼ [Advertisement](#)

[CONTINUE STORY](#) ↓



That highlights coastal erosion's economic threat to our state and the nation. But losing the coast is also a human tragedy. Few people understand that better than Chief Albert Naquin of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians.

For generations, Chief Naquin's family and other descendants of these American-Indian communities have lived on Isle de Jean Charles in southern Terrebonne Parish. So many hurricanes have hit the island that residents there considered flooding a regular occurrence -- much like people in other communities in the Mississippi River Delta endured seasonal river floods until the Army Corps of Engineers bounded the river with levees.

Those levees, of course, stopped the Mississippi's sediment from replenishing wetlands that protected the coast -- including Isle de Jean Charles -- from storm surge. The island was left much more exposed to flooding. Now it's also eroding into the sea. Once four miles wide, its girth reaches only a quarter mile today. The island's levee, which is 6 to 7 feet high, is hardly enough to fend off the direct strike from storm surges.

So when Hurricane Gustav flooded the island this month, Chief Naquin declared it was time for its 150 to 175 remaining residents to abandon the island and relocate farther inland -- as he and his wife did after Hurricane Carmen three decades ago. Just two weeks after Gustav, Hurricane Ike's surge overtopped island levees as well, reinforcing the chief's message.

Chief Naquin said that this is the last hurricane season in which he will lobby for aid for island residents. Other tribal leaders also are trying to convince residents to relocate. It is a terrible thing

to have to abandon one's home. But as Chief Naquin put it: "How much beating can you take before you give up?"

It's partly because of tragedies like this that Louisiana is spending \$1 billion over the next four years on rebuilding the coast and on flood protection measures. That's a formidable investment, but it's not enough to make a dent in coastal erosion before communities much larger than Isle de Jean Charles, including some in the New Orleans metro area, suffer the same fate.

Louisiana will have far more resources for the task in 2017, when its share of royalties from oil produced off our coast will rise from \$20 million a year to more than \$600 million annually. But the coast cannot wait that long, and only the federal government has the substantial sums needed now to begin turning back the sea at Isle de Jean Charles and other coastal areas.

Congress needs to keep all this in mind as Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal and other state leaders seek a strong commitment to fund billions in coastal restoration projects, many that are already authorized. Any aid may already be too late for Isle de Jean Charles residents. But we should not wait for thousands of others to endure the same ordeal before we rescue the coast.