

*Op/Ed Piece*

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**We Must Not Be Forgotten**

By: Daniel Walker  
Houma, Louisiana

A season of anniversaries commemorating some of the most disastrous days in American history has passed, and the 100,000 residents of Terrebonne Parish in south Louisiana quietly mark another year of vulnerability to the powerful Gulf of Mexico, another year fearing the worst that nature has to offer.

This is the community I call home, a community unknown by name to most Americans, yet invaluable in the critical services we provide to this nation. It is here, less than 60 miles southwest of New Orleans, where men and women provide oil and gas that power the nation and produce seafood that feeds the world.

For centuries, residents of Terrebonne Parish bayou communities have worked in and lived on the productive wetlands that now support the critical infrastructure of the offshore energy industry and its thousands of miles of pipelines, serve as a sanctuary for migrating waterfowl and nourish a bountiful supply of wild shrimp, crabs and game fish. We are a “working coast,” not a home to condos and resorts, but literally, the “Heart of America’s Wetland.” It is the heart of Cajun culture and its wonderful “joie de vivre” that is unique and important in American folk traditions and treasures.

However, a deadly combination of coastal erosion, saltwater intrusion and subsidence have acted as thieves in the night, stealing the wetlands, oak ridges, and cypress forests that once protected our community and culture from killer storms and hurricanes. We are told that this deadly process has robbed our state of more than 30 square miles of wetlands each year over the past 30 years, making this area and all we produce dangerously vulnerable to historic storms like Katrina and Rita.

Here in the Terrebonne Basin, we experience 40 percent of the total wetland loss happening in all of the United States, an average of seven square miles a year in normal times. However, in a three-week period last year, our basin lost 17 square miles as a result of the devastating storm surges of Hurricane Katrina and, most significantly, Hurricane Rita. Our shoreline today looks like scientists projected it would look twenty years from now as result of normal coastal land loss rates.

Over 20 years ago, long before Katrina and Rita, the people of Terrebonne Parish recognized the threat of the encroaching Gulf of Mexico and began efforts to implement a hurricane protection levee system, but have been mostly ignored by the U.S. Congress. Today, we face the ravages of killer storms without hurricane levee protection.

One year ago, over 10,000 homes and businesses in coastal bayou communities by the names of Chauvin, Bayou Dularge, Dulac and Montegut, were inundated by up to 9 feet of tidal surge as Category 3 Hurricane Rita approached the southwest Louisiana border, approximately 180 miles to the west of Terrebonne Parish.

Over 10,000 people were left homeless by 40 mile-per-hour south winds from a storm that did not even hit our coast! Without a hurricane levee system, a future direct hit will likely annihilate this region, potentially killing thousands, destroying homes and

businesses along the way, and crippling the oil and gas infrastructure here so severely that gas prices will skyrocket beyond currently shocking levels.

But there is a plan for salvation. It is called the Morganza-to-the-Gulf Hurricane Protection System. As designed, the system shall be comprised of 72 miles of earthen levee, 12 navigable floodgates, 12 environmental water control structures and a lock complex on our highway to the Gulf, the Houma Navigation Canal. The Morganza system will stretch from western Terrebonne Parish to Bayou Lafourche at its easternmost point, protecting over 120,000 people and 1,700 square miles of residential and industrial areas, farmland and saline and freshwater marshes from expected storm surges of a Category 3 hurricane.

The environmental and economic benefits of the levee system are also tremendous. It will reduce saltwater intrusion and durations of wetland flooding, manage freshwater flow, reduce insurance claims and insurance rates, and improve navigation.

After seven years of pleading our case in Washington, the Morganza levee system is finally in a position to gain federal authorization in the 2006 Water Resources Development Act (WRDA), now the focus of a Congressional conference committee. Beyond that, funding will be necessary to make the complete levee system a reality by 2020.

Over three years ago, the citizens of Terrebonne Parish began taxing themselves to help pay for the Morganza system's \$1 billion price tag. The quarter-cent sales tax has generated over \$15 million to date toward construction of the levees, enabling local officials to begin turning dirt on the project's first leg this year. But local funds are simply not enough. We need America's assistance and support.

We urge Americans everywhere to support federal authorization and funding for construction of the Morganza-to-the-Gulf Hurricane Protection System. Join us in calling on federal lawmakers throughout the country to embrace the Morganza plan and the hope it offers to this part of the nation. It is a matter of salvation, not just for my community, but also for a critical piece of American industry, real estate, and culture. We must not be forgotten.

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*About the Author:*

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