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Iowa has large stake in erosion of Louisiana wetlands

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SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

Louisiana's coastal wetlands are disappearing, but do Iowans care? They should.

The economic future of America's Heartland is tied in many ways to America's River - the Mississippi - and ultimately the health of America's wetlands. As the wetlands erode, so do five of the nation's 15 largest ports. Those ports aid the transportation of millions of tons of Iowan corn, soybeans, cereal grains and oilseeds to buyers worldwide and deliver hundreds of millions of dollars in iron, steel, and chemicals back to Iowa.

But, despite its critical importance to Iowa and to the nation, we are allowing 25 to 35 square miles of Louisiana's coast to wash away each year. Every 38 minutes, we lose an area of wetland large enough to fill a football field.

Not only do Louisiana's wetlands feed the Iowan economy, they are also vital to the national economy, ecological sustainability, and domestic energy security. In addition to sustaining ports in the Mississippi delta, the wetlands protect against severe storms, such as Hurricane Katrina.

Wetlands create natural levees. But their degeneration draws populated and commercial areas closer and closer to the coastline. In fact, some scientists say that, had Hurricane Katrina struck 50 years ago, wetlands would have lessened the surge that reached New Orleans by as much as 5 to 10 feet.

In Louisiana's coastal wetlands - known as America's wetland - ecology and energy share the same interests. The coast is ecologically invaluable as it houses 79 rare, threatened, or endangered species and over 4 million wintering waterfowl. Simultaneously, it protects a network of pipelines and refineries, without which America would lose access to approximately 30 percent of its oil and natural gas. As our wetlands disappear, their ecological and economic significance disappears with them.

From America's Heartland to America's wetland, we must all join forces to save Louisiana's coast. Existing levees along the Mississippi are blocking sediments and nutrients that the river would naturally deposit in the delta to compensate for rapid coastal erosion and subsidence. Instead, a growing

hypoxia or dead zone the size of New Jersey has emerged in the gulf. Chemical, agricultural, and industrial runoff has amassed there because levees separate it from wetlands that could diffuse the toxic river wash.

The America's WETLAND Foundation recently visited Dubuque with Louisiana officials and community leaders from Women of the Storm to explain what we all have in common and how wetland loss impacts the Iowan economy and world ecology. We briefed Iowa policy leaders on the efforts to save the wetlands, for together we can develop a sustainable and productive coast.

Working in conjunction with scientists and experts across the nation, Louisiana has developed a master plan to save America's wetland. It proposes a comprehensive, systemwide approach to restoring the Mississippi's natural sediment deposits and replenish the wetlands. The Louisiana Legislature recently appropriated \$200 million to the execution of the master plan after voters passed two constitutional amendments that protected federal dollars in a trust reserved for restoration.

In Congress, we are brought together by the fate of The Water Resources Development Act, which the president has said he will veto. The bill contains provisions to secure areas vital to Iowa commerce, and it prevents the erosion of the wetlands' value to the nation.

If you love the great river or if you are a farmer or a conservationist, a tradesman or a wildlife enthusiast, if you pay an electricity bill or buy gas, you depend on the wetlands. Louisiana needs help from Iowa and from the rest of the United States, especially those who depend on the Mississippi River system, to restore America's wetland and all it offers.

R. KING MILLING is chairman of the board of America's WETLAND Foundation.

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