Holding Louisiana.

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Holding Louisiana

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Abstract

In Louisiana, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers faces the enormous challenge of rebuilding a delta region that is quickly sinking. The challenge is complicated by the fact that many of the Corps's own flood control and navigation projects have accelerated sinking of the wetlands. Another complication is that the Corps's hurricane protection programs have been hampered by environmental lawsuits. After 1965, for example, when Hurricane Betsy breached the levees of Lake Pontchartrain, environmentalists blocked the Corps's plan to build gated hurricane barriers. Corps engineers repeatedly warned that, without hurricane barriers, the New Orleans levees might not withstand a Bestylike Class Three storm. Yet environmentalists claimed that hurricane barriers would spread housing projects that posed a threat to coastal wetlands. Ironically, tragically, the same massive engineering that protects coastal Louisiana also aggravates the sinking and deterioration that increases the impact of storms.

Project MUSE

Holding Louisiana

TODD SHALLAT

Land sinks. Water rises. Coastal Louisiana is losing ground to the ocean as fast as any region on earth—an acre every twenty-five minutes, a slab the size of New Orleans every five or six years.[1] Geologists call it subsidence. Swampers say the salt marsh trembles and floats where the toe of Louisiana points toward Havana, bleeding soil from thirty-one states. Layers of compacted mud weigh down the butter-soft lowlands. Ponds become estuaries. Barrier islands erode, exposing beachfront. The shore migrates, and so does the mile-wide river that has in its time carved five different paths to the ocean. Curling and coiling like a snake in a sandbox, the Mississippi giveth and the Mississippi taketh away. It fans alluvial silt, then leaps to a new location, building, destroying. No dam or system of levees can hold that mudscape-in-motion. Yet hold we must. For the sake of 2.1 million Louisianans on 3.3 million acres of marshland. For the nation's largest fin and shellfish-ery. For nine ports, 3,000 miles of shipping channels, 16,000 miles of pipelines, 180,000 licensed saltwater sport fishermen, and a $4-billion-a-year tourist industry. For 70 percent of the winged commuters on the Mississippi Flyway. For 15 percent of America's oil and 20 percent of its natural gas.

Holding Louisiana has vexed the nation's preeminent builders since the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers first assumed control of the New Orleans levees in 1917. The corps, founded in 1802, has defended the Mississippi from foreign invasion, from Confederate rebellion, from snags that impaled

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1. Donald F. Boesch et al., "Scientific Assessment of Coastal Wetland Loss, Restoration and Management in Louisiana," *Journal of Coastal Research* 20 (May 1994): 1–6; Karen Wright, "Diluvian Tremens: Policy Initiatives Could Turn Tide on Wetlands Loss," *Scientific American*, October 1989, 32–34; Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Conservation Task Force, *Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Restoration Plan* (n.p., November 1993), 2.

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