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Keep Coastal Money Focused on the Coast: Our Future Depends on It

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THE DEVASTATING FLOODING during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita spurred Louisiana to confront its land loss crisis head-on. The Legislature created the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) and directed it to develop a master plan for restoring the state's vanishing coastline. The plan, if implemented, is projected to begin yielding annual net land gains within 30 years, a remarkable prospect for a state that has lost 1,880 square miles of land since 1930. However, the plan comes with a big price tag: \$50 billion over 50 years.¹

Louisiana is beginning to receive a major down-payment on these costs through settlements from the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The state is slated to receive a total of \$8.7 billion for coastal restoration, including \$6.8 billion from the recently announced BP settlement.²

Unfortunately, there already is a proposal to divert some of these coastal restoration funds to another purpose. Governor Bobby Jindal has asked the CPRA to allow up to \$350 million in oil spill settlement money to be used on the Louisiana Highway 1 Bridge project. The LA 1 bridge project, when completed, will be a 19-mile, elevated toll road from Golden Meadow to Port Fourchon. Specifically, Governor Jindal proposes to redirect any surplus from \$780 million in coastal restoration projects funded by the federal RESTORE Act, the federal vehicle for allocating Clean Water Act civil penalties from the oil spill, to the LA 1 bridge project.

Last month, the CPRA board considered Governor Jindal's proposal. Some board members questioned the legality and prudence of using oil spill money on transportation infrastructure, and the matter was tabled while the board sought a legal opinion. Now the proposal is back on the agenda for the board's meeting on Wednesday, October 21.

Even if the proposal passes legal muster, there are several reasons why it is not prudent policy, specifically:

- In the context of a \$50 billion master plan that is far from funded, the supposed surplus in coastal restoration funding is a mirage. Even if the state had the money to execute the master plan, the plan itself indicates there are additional worthwhile restoration projects that should be pursued. It notes that doubling funding to \$100 billion would yield even greater land gains.³ As a result, any "surplus" from a specific coastal restoration project should be used to fund the next restoration project on the state's long and under-funded list. While advocates of the governor's proposal have claimed that the master plan includes the LA 1 bridge project, it does so only by citing the highway as an example of an asset that is at risk if coastal land loss is not abated.
- Shifting funding away from coastal restoration to a transportation infrastructure project, like the LA 1 bridge project, sends a bad message to the rest of the country. It conveys a lack of dedication by Louisiana to restoring its coast. This could jeopardize future federal funding that will be critical to executing the master plan.
- Approving funds for the LA 1 bridge project could open the door to similar requests for other infrastructure projects, further diluting coastal restoration project funding.

If the CPRA board votes to redirect coastal restoration funds to the bridge project, it could undermine the CPRA's widely praised master plan,

which was approved just three years ago. The plan rightly characterizes Louisiana's land loss as an existential crisis that must be addressed using all available resources.

The competing concern articulated by proponents of the governor's proposal is economic development. Louisiana Highway 1 is a vital piece of economic development infrastructure from both a state and federal standpoint. Its terminus, Port Fourchon, is the epicenter of oil and gas production activity in the Gulf of Mexico. According to the LA 1 Coalition, only the southern half of the project, which was funded through tolls, is complete. Future phases are not fully funded and the highway is expected to face closures of increasing frequency due to flooding.

It may be important for the state to complete the LA 1 bridge project. But it should not do so by diverting money from coastal restoration projects. Reversing Louisiana's land loss is the ultimate economic development project: It is essential to south Louisiana's long-term viability.

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ENDNOTES

1 Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, *Louisiana's Comprehensive Master Plan for a Sustainable Coast*, p. 34.

2 Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, "Louisiana a Step Closer to Receiving More than \$6.8 billion for State Claims Related to BP Oil Spill," October 5, 2015, p. 1.

3 Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, *Louisiana's Comprehensive Master Plan for a Sustainable Coast*, 2012, p. 36.