

Corps of Engineers Holds Diversion Summit Mississippi Freshwater Diversion Summit: March 3-5, 2009

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers held a three-day Diversion Summit (“the summit”) in New Orleans to convene scientific experts and stakeholders in a detailed discussion of the use of river diversions to restore Louisiana’s coastal marshes and estuaries. Packed to capacity in the main conference room of a French Quarter hotel, more than 250 stakeholders gathered to listen, present, and work toward progress in Louisiana coastal restoration.

Brigadier General Walsh, Commander of the Army Corps Mississippi Valley Division, remained at the front of the room for the entire event, signaling the great importance and urgency of a path toward land-building and restoration. Garret Graves, Director of the Louisiana Governor’s Office of Coastal Affairs, boldly set the tone at the onset of the summit by declaring, “We are going to do diversions in Louisiana. It’s going to happen.”

The summit included dozens of presentations from leading experts that focused on the viability of diversions as a means of land-building in the Mississippi River Delta. A panel made of senior and technical representatives from the States of Louisiana and Mississippi, as well as federal agencies (EPA, NOAA, NRCS, US F&W, USGS), oversaw each presentation. The first two days of the summit were open to the public, while the third day was a closed session for panel members to develop future plans.

Technical presentations were made on March 3rd, with comment from several leading scientists who interpreted data supporting large-scale diversions as a viable land-building mechanism for coastal Louisiana. Agency presentations followed the scientific presentations, relaying both technical information and policy positions that were largely in general agreement with earlier presentations. March 4th was a public meeting that began with presentations from academia, consultants, and business leaders. Again, a majority of speakers—many of whom warned that we need bold, aggressive action and cannot wait any longer to restore coastal wetlands—expressed support for the use of diversions.

Wrapping up the two days of open session, Environmental Defense Fund, National Audubon Society, The Nature Conservancy, National Wildlife Federation, Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation, Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, Tulane Institute on Water Resources Law and Policy, and the Lower 9th Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development made a joint presentation to the panel. The diverse team of experts united to relay a comprehensive call to action. The two-hour presentation advocated the urgent need to restore Louisiana’s coastal areas, as they are the first line of defense against hurricanes and storm surges

The presenters addressed how to best build diversions – taking into consideration the working landscape of the delta – and how to build the extraordinary leadership that will be needed to move such projects forward in a timely manner. This leadership will entail great cooperation amongst state and federal agencies and the non-governmental organization (NGO) community. The organizations delivered messages to the panel on the multitude of vital ecologic functions the Mississippi River Delta serves, and the need for diversions to help preserve those functions.

The cultural heritage of the communities made vulnerable to the loss of coastal protection was also relayed, with the multiple lines of defense strategy, including home elevation and wetland restoration, being strongly supported by local residents.

The presenters called for the Army Corps and other federal agencies to take swift action to implement land-building diversions. The call was made with recognition that diversions present both opportunities and challenges—including potential changes to fisheries and the navigation industry. Despite these challenges, inaction is not an option, and the responsible, successful operation of large-scale diversions is entirely possible with cautious and astute management. One major diversion that serves as a comprehensive model for land-building projects in Louisiana is Myrtle Grove. This ongoing project, authorized in 2007 by Congress, provides a great opportunity for lessons in land-building and wetland restoration, coordination and leadership, and stakeholder engagement that can be used in future diversion projects.

The message of the united NGO community was clearly delivered to the state and federal agencies at the summit:

- Louisiana is extremely vulnerable and at risk due to coastal land loss in the deltaic plain.
- Large-scale diversions are a vital key to coastal restoration and must be built immediately.
- This effort must entail strong leadership from the Army Corps, outstanding coordination of both state and federal agencies as well as NGOs, and meaningful engagement of stakeholders.

The groups urge planning and implementation of diversion projects to move forward immediately with top priority, as they are a key to the sustainable protection of coastal Louisiana. Time is of the essence. The scientific research and analysis is robust. The people are eager to take action to protect their families and communities. Please click [here](#) to view the PowerPoint presentations and an accompanying Briefing Book prepared by the NGO coalition.

The Army Corps will have a report on the summit and the conclusions drawn during the closed session available in early April.