

Rally for Coastal Restoration Marks First Day of Hurricane Season Elected Officials, Community Leaders to Army Corps: ‘Prioritize Restoration of Wetlands Destroyed by the MRGO’

New Orleans – Today, nearly 150 residents from New Orleans and St. Bernard Parish rallied atop a levee in the Lower Ninth Ward, calling for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to make restoration of the wetlands destroyed by the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO) a top priority.

The MRGO, a deep draft channel built in the 1960s to connect the Gulf of Mexico to the City of New Orleans, resulted in saltwater intrusion and the decimation of tens of thousands of acres of protective wetlands in St. Bernard and Orleans Parish. The channel is widely blamed by residents and scientists for the intensity of the devastating storm surge that inundated communities—such as the Lower Ninth Ward and Chalmette—during Hurricane Katrina.

In 2007, the U.S. Congress passed legislation directing the Army Corps to prepare a plan for restoring the wetlands along the MRGO by May 2008. To date, the Corps has no plan and aims to finalize one by late 2010 or early 2011.

“Deadlines seem to come and go within the Corps circles,” said Craig Taffaro, St. Bernard Parish President. “But we have an energized, mobilized group of citizens.”

The community is not idly sitting by, waiting for the government to act. Sustainable rebuilding is occurring throughout the region.

“With the strong support of the entire country, New Orleans’ citizens have worked tirelessly to lay the groundwork to become one of the most sustainable cities in America—but we need the Corps to protect our nation’s investment by acting in 2009 to restore the vital wetlands buffer destroyed by the Corps’ MRGO project,” said Beth Galante, director of the Global Green New Orleans office.

“Wetlands are a critical line of defense against hurricanes,” said Amanda Moore, Coastal Louisiana Organizer with the National Wildlife Federation. “The Corps needs to do their part in the sustainable rebirth of our communities with protection and responsible stewardship on both sides of the levee. And it needs to happen now.”

Elected officials from New Orleans and St. Bernard Parish recognized the urgency and importance of wetland restoration to the future of their communities.

“Yes, levees can be built. Yes, pumps can have backup generators. But the final solution is to restore our wetlands. Not only for St. Bernard Parish and for New Orleans, but for Louisiana,” said Cynthia Willard-Lewis, Councilmember District E.

Councilmember-At-Large Jacquelyn Brechtel Clarkson, who recently returned from The Netherlands with Senator Mary Landrieu, said, “The most important thing we learned from this trip is that they reclaim their wetlands. They restore their wetlands. We can do this too. We’re ready to take it on.”

The rally was organized by the MRGO Must Go Coalition, a group of 16 environmental, community, and social justice organizations working together to restore and protect Coastal Louisiana and the people who reside there.