



OPINION – EDITORIAL PRESENTED BY LOUISIANA LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR BILLY NUNGESSER

(871 words)

Turning the tide on land loss in coastal Louisiana is a matter of self-preservation. However, the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority's (CPRA) plan to address coastal land loss is a staggering \$2 billion river diversion that, at best, will build minimal land below the water line at a tremendous cost to our wildlife and essential fish habitat, forever altering our Sportsman's Paradise.

I oppose this large-scale river diversion, and I'm not alone. The parish councils of Plaquemines, St. Bernard, and St. Tammany have joined in because those communities will lose already limited flood protections while the negative impact on their fisheries environment upends the livelihood of fishermen who rely on freshwater, saltwater, and land.

Scientists including Joseph Suhayda, Ph.D. of the Louisiana Water Resources Research Center, and Moby Solangi, Ph.D., of the Institute of Marine Mammal Studies also oppose the diversion project. Dr. Solangi claims that diverting polluted Mississippi River water into the Mid Barataria Basin and the Mid Breton Basin will kill upwards of 70% of our bottlenose dolphin populations with other biological devastation to follow. According to Solangi, "This project will be the beginning of the end to the estuaries on both sides of the Mississippi River".

CPRA's plan is deeply flawed. They claim that they will use the river to build land through sediment diversions, much the same way land was built 1,000 years ago. The Mississippi River today is not the same river it was 1,000 years ago or even the same river of 100 years ago. Dams and structures built in the northern parts of the river capture the sediment we need to build land in coastal Louisiana. Less than a quarter of the sediment that once flowed downstream actually make it down to our area today. A real-world example of how much sediment this diversion will produce is to drop two grains of sand into a two-liter bottle of water. That's it! Yet CPRA is willing to bet \$2 billion on this in hopes that it will build land in 50 years.

The "freshwater" diversion, as proposed, will dump polluted water into our rich estuaries. The Mississippi is the second most polluted river in the United States. That pollution has led to a dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico of approximately 5,700 square miles. Tidal flow movement, which helps dilute the pollution in the gulf, is over ten feet. Imagine dumping this pollution into our estuaries where the tidal flow movement is less than two feet. It's no wonder Dr. Solangi calls this "the beginning of the end".

It should also be noted that Congress at the urging of a member or members of the Louisiana delegation worked hard to push CPRA's agenda by trying to change laws that protect endangered species and essential fish habitats. Congress legislation to get a waiver to the Endangered Species Act (covering sea turtles) and the Magnuson Stevens Fishery Act (covering essential fish habitats) were unsuccessful. But at 11:00 p.m. on a Friday in 2018 when few were paying attention, Congress amended the Marine Mammals Act to allow the state to simply monitor the diversion's impact on dolphins. Monitoring allows the project to destroy

thousands of these animals with impunity. If after five years of monitoring, after a large percentage of dolphins are dead, will we stop the diversion project after spending \$2 billion?

Furthermore, a recent study conducted by researchers at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland for the federal Marine Mammal Commission concluded that the bottleneck dolphins living in the Barataria Basin will become “virtually extinct” as a result of this diversion.

Proponents of diversion know the plan is deeply flawed. They have waged an all-out propaganda campaign to sell the idea with full-page newspaper ads and an aggressive public relations effort that shamefully misleads by portraying Shrimp Task Force member and strong diversion opponent A.C. Cooper as a supporter. I am deeply concerned that the diversion project, as proposed, is nothing more than another insider deal designed to provide a few well-connected powerbrokers with huge contracts at the expense of everyday coastal Louisianans.

In addition, our coastal communities don't have decades to wait on a promise that “may” build land. We need a 5-year plan, not a 50-year plan. I believe that the better and faster way to save our coast is by building land **now** through dredging and restoring barrier islands and ridges that once protected our communities from storm surge. When I was president of Plaquemines Parish, we developed a plan that built forested ridges enhancing our flood protection, lowering storm surge by five feet, and protecting our critical marshland. The plan was so good that FEMA recognized it as flood protection. During the BP oil spill disaster of 2011, berms were built to capture oil before it washed into the marshes. The Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation initially charged that the plan would “destroy” the gulf, but the strategy worked so well that the Foundation later called these berms the silver lining of the oil spill. We can build over 200 miles of land much quicker and safer for our wildlife and our culture than CPRA is proposing, and we should.

Billy Nungesser
Louisiana Lieutenant Governor