



Everything New Orleans

\$2.9 billion plan restores MR-GO's environmental damage

Published: Thursday, December 16, 2010, 10:06 PM Updated: Friday, December 17, 2010, 1:16 PM



By **Mark Schleifstein**, *The Times-Picayune*

The **Army Corps of Engineers** has unveiled a sweeping \$2.9 billion plan to restore the environmental damage caused by the construction and operation of the now-closed **Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet**, which includes a new freshwater diversion near Violet; restoration of cypress swamp in wetlands adjacent to the Lower 9th Ward, Algiers and Chalmette; protection of shorelines along the eastern New Orleans land bridge; and restoration or nourishment of wetlands along Lake Borgne.



[View full size](#)

Michael DeMocker, Times-Picayune archive

The proposed diversion would first move Mississippi River water and sediment into the Central Wetlands Unit, which is sandwiched between the 40 Arpent Canal and the levee along the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway and the MR-GO. The water would then flow out into the MR-GO and into Lake Borgne.

If approved, the project would take 10 years to complete, with construction beginning as early as 2012. It would restore, nourish or protect about 92 square miles of wetlands and land.

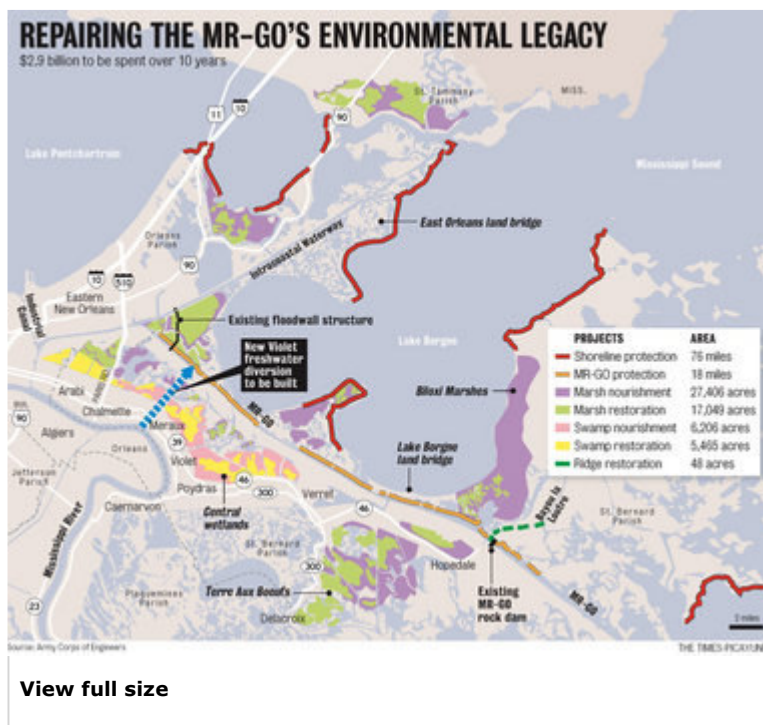
Included are three new recreation areas: a boardwalk and picnic shelters at the northern end of Caffin Avenue that would also be used for wetlands education programs; a walking and bicycle path and picnic area along the new Violet diversion, and a pier, walkway and picnic area incorporating the **Hurricane Katrina** memorial at Shell Beach in St. Bernard Parish.

Each recreation area would be provided with solar lighting, parking and bathrooms.

Construction of the projects would be staged, with those projects providing most protection from storm surge being built first, according to the plan.

The plan -- which Congress ordered the corps to develop after deauthorizing the MR-GO as a navigation channel in 2007 -- still must clear a variety of major hurdles, including whether Louisiana would be required to pay 35 percent of the cost of most of the projects. Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority Chairman Garret Graves, the state's senior coastal official, in August notified the corps that the state believes the federal law authorizing the restoration plan requires that the federal government pay 100 percent of all costs.

Corps officials threatened to hold off on the restoration plan until the state agreed to the 35 percent split, Graves said. But then they backed off, and included a statement in the written plan explaining the disagreement.



Graves said that's an important concession because the state and the federal government can now offer the restoration plan as a project that could be financed with fines and mitigation costs that BP and other responsible parties will pay for the **Macondo oil spill**.

The corps also contends that its rules require the state to provide all land used for individual projects, including the more than 150 million cubic yards of mostly underwater sediment needed for restoration. Again, the state disagrees.

The plan calls for most sediment to be dredged from the bottom of Lake Borgne in what corps project manager Greg Miller calls a checkerboard configuration. No area would be dredged deeper than 10 feet below its existing surface below the water,

and the pattern should alleviate concerns that the dredging will funnel storm surge or waves towards the shoreline, he said.

St. Bernard Parish officials also are expected to object to the plan to cut the Violet diversion through the unpopulated Sinclair Tract in Meraux, rather than using the existing Violet Canal two miles to the south. The diversion channel will be 12 feet deep and 250 feet wide at its bottom, and would include five culverts for roads, a railroad and utilities.

Miller said the selected path is shorter and less expensive, and would destroy fewer acres of existing wetlands. The report indicates using the existing canal would require relocating 121 businesses, residences or structures, and still would not deliver enough water to adequately freshen Lake Borgne, the Biloxi Marshes and portions of Mississippi Sound.

The diversion must deliver 1,000 cubic feet per second of water and sediment during most of the year, increasing to about 7,000 feet per second from mid-April through May. The existing canal could only handle 2,000 cubic feet per second.

The Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation also favors using the existing Violet Canal, if possible, and has serious concerns about the Lake Borgne sediment borrow pit plan, said spokesman John Lopez.

Overall, however, the organization favors the plan.

"This restoration project, if realized to any degree, will be the largest one ever contemplated in this part of the coast and has tremendous promise to do some good," he said.

The proposed diversion would first move Mississippi River water and sediment into the Central Wetlands Unit, which is sandwiched between the 40 Arpent Canal and the levee along the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway and the MR-GO. The water would then flow out into the MR-GO and into Lake Borgne.

The design is based on historic salinity levels at various locations along the MR-GO, with the goal to restore water's salt content to levels found before the channel was built. At Bayou Dupre, that was 2 to 3 parts per thousand, which rose to 6 to 10 parts per thousand when the channel was opened, and has dropped to 4 to 7 parts per million with the recent construction of barriers on the canal at Bayou la Loutre and the Golden Triangle wetlands.

The diversion plan also has been opposed by oyster growers and shrimp fishers, who fear damage to existing oyster leases or to the timing of shrimp fishing. Such disruptions occurred this year because the state opened as many diversions as possible in an attempt to keep oil from the Macondo spill out of wetland areas.

Miller said the corps is aware there will be some changes in fisheries, but pointed out that some oyster leases in Lake Borgne did not exist prior to the opening of the MR-GO because the area was too fresh for oysters. The changed water conditions are expected to increase oyster production in other areas, he added.

The Violet diversion will be financed with a different federal-state split than the rest of the projects, thanks to a separate line item in a recent federal bill. Local sponsors would be required to pay 25 percent of its cost, and the state of Mississippi may be partly on the hook because of the reduced salinity expected in Mississippi Sound.

Federal officials have attempted to pair the individual projects within the plan with other already authorized projects.

For instance, plans to restore cypress forest within the Central Wetlands Unit tie in with a project to allow New Orleans and St. Bernard Parish to pour treated wastewater into the wetland area. The freshwater and nutrients promote cypress growth.

Another key goal of the restoration plan is to protect shoreline that buffers populated areas from hurricane storm surge.

A lengthy stretch of the northwest Lake Borgne coastline from Alligator Point to the Rigolets in New Orleans would be armored with rock. A mirror area along easternmost Lake Pontchartrain also would be armored, with wetlands reconstruction and nourishment planned just north of Venetian Isles.

Wetlands nourishment consists of spraying a layer of sediment above existing, but weak, wetlands. The material gets absorbed into the soils in which wetland grasses are growing, extending their lifetime.

In designing the projects, the corps used three estimates of the relative rise of sea level -- the combination of the effects of subsidence and rising water levels -- expected through 2065. The estimates range from a rise of 1.8 feet to a high of 3.7 feet.

The project will have the most impact if global warming effects are at the low end of predictions. At the highest level, the value of the projects drops significantly, as rising water would drown more wetlands.

Corps officials considered thousands of individual restoration projects in the plan, combining them into a variety of alternatives, and then selecting from among three "best buy" combinations.

A 45-day public review of the plan and an accompanying environmental impact statement begins today, and ends Jan. 31, Miller said. The plan also will be reviewed by an independent peer review team appointed by the corps to look at all restoration projects in this area.

Public meetings on the plan are scheduled for Jan. 20 at 6 p.m. at C.F. Rowley Alternative School, 49 Madison Ave., Chalmette; and Jan, 25 at 6 p.m. at Leo Seal Community Center, 529 Highway 90, Waveland, Miss.

Following the reviews, an updated version of the plan and environmental statement will undergo a 30-day review, and then the report will be submitted to the chief of the corps.

Miller said the corps is targeting completion of that process by the end of September 2011, when it will be submitted to the White House for a final review before being transmitted to Congress.

Unlike other corps planning documents, which require Congress to vote to authorize the project and then hold a separate vote, often years later, to appropriate money for construction, Congress already has authorized the MR-GO restoration and need only begin appropriating money for its construction.

More information about the plan is available on the web at **www.mrgo.gov**, or by contacting Lee Muller, 504.862.1759.

*Mark Schleifstein can be reached at **mschleifstein@timespicayune.com** or 504.826.3327.*

© 2011 NOLA.com. All rights reserved.