

Committee on Resources

Full Committee

Witness Statement

Testimony for the U. S. House Committee on Resources

Submitted by

State Representative Hunt Downer

Speaker, Louisiana House of Representatives

Monday, May 3, 1999

Mr. Chairman and Honorable Members of the Committee, I would like to welcome you to Louisiana and thank you for the opportunity to express my strong support of the Conservation and Reinvestment Act of 1999, H.R. 701.

I would like to thank Congressmen Tauzin and Johns for all of their hard work on this legislation in an attempt to correct the inequity of the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act.

I have lived in coastal South Louisiana my entire life and have a unique advantage over many. As a boy growing up I fished both onshore and offshore and saw firsthand the beauty of this state, saw it as it changed and to my eyes began to disappear. As a young adult, working my way through school I worked offshore as a roughneck and roustabout on the rigs in the Gulf. There, I became more familiar with our coast and the barrier islands. As a national guardsman I have assisted with disaster relief after hurricanes and floods. And, as an elected public official, I have learned more of the intricacies of this problem, being called upon by constituents to procure help from the state and federal governments to fight coastal erosion and all that goes with it. So, for my entire life, in one capacity or another, I have watched the changes, the disappearance and destruction of our coast, our barrier islands, our marshes and our wildlife and fisheries. Places where I fished twenty years ago no longer support freshwater fish because of the encroachment of saltwater and our potable drinking water supply is threatened. Birds and animals have become endangered because of the destruction of nesting sites and natural habitat along the coast and in the marshes. Islands that, in the past helped protect us from the destruction of hurricanes, no longer exist. I have literally watched the Louisiana coast, its flora and fauna wash away and disappear. Once familiar places, gone forever.

Please allow me to put this in perspective. In 15 minutes one-half acre of Louisiana coastline is lost. That's two acres per hour or 20 square miles in one year. I jokingly tell my North Louisiana colleagues in the legislature that they need to support coastal restoration because at the rate we're losing land it is possible that in the next few years my district will be in theirs and we will be running against each other. But all joking aside, no other place on Earth is disappearing as quickly as the Barataria-Terrebonne Estuary. Yet our coast, one of the most fertile wetland ecosystems in the world is not receiving the attention it deserves. On the other hand, the federal government has pledged \$8 billion to save the Everglades. It is estimated that it will

cost approximately \$14 billion to save our coast. And the longer we wait, the worse the problem gets. If nothing is done soon, we will lose about \$150 billion in infrastructure.

The disappearance of wetlands also contributes to dead zones in the Gulf. These are areas of oxygen-depleted water sometimes covering 7,000 square miles. Scientists who study the problem tell us that this is caused by fertilizer from the Midwest that washes down the rivers. Wetlands filter these chemicals but as the wetlands disappear, so do the filters. The dead zones have doubled since 1992, only six short years.

And we have given so much for so little. Although the federal mineral revenue from Louisiana to the federal government exceeds the top six states almost ten fold, the return to our state is the lowest of these six states. And none of these states has suffered the infrastructural, social or economic impact to the extent of Louisiana. We have suffered displacement of communities, we have seen displacement of offshore workers, and changes and disappearance of the culture and way of life for many along the coast. As mentioned before, our hunting and fishing have suffered and, therefore, our tourism industry. And, please remember, tourism is the second largest industry in Louisiana generating over \$6 billion.

Louisiana stands ready to take action through the Coast 2050 Program and the Coastal Restoration Plan to correct this devastation. The passage of this legislation will make these plans a reality. I urge you to consider our plight and correct the past inequities by giving Louisiana its fair share in the final version of this bill.

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