FROM THE BAYOU…

A draft comprehensive wetland restoration plan for coastal Louisiana, called the Louisiana Coastal Area (LCA) Comprehensive Coastwide Ecosystem Restoration Study, is currently being prepared. Under the joint direction of the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources (LDNR) and the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), over 120 scientists and engineers prepared a report similar in scale to the Everglades restoration plan. The draft report evaluates the feasibility of implementing restoration strategies to protect the 3.67 million acres of wetland in Louisiana. The study has not been released for public review, but has already received significant attention in Washington. As a TWS member, you will be interested in the plans focus on reintroducing Mississippi River water to Louisiana wetlands, one of the world's ecosystems rich in wildlife and fisheries. As a taxpayer, you will want to review the estimated $14 billion price tag to address Louisiana's land loss. Currently, the Coastal Wetland Planning, Preservation and Restoration Act (CWPPRA) has provided 108 restoration projects to coastal Louisiana since 1992 (www.lacoast.gov). Although other restoration projects have been built in Louisiana, including two large-scale freshwater reintroduction projects, the success of these restoration efforts have not adequately reduced Louisiana's wetland loss. These projects have been successful, but defeating land loss will be more costly than the millions of dollars currently allocated to Louisiana's restoration. The LCA Study outlines a program to significantly increase the scale of current restoration efforts.

The goal of the LCA Study is to rehabilitate the Louisiana coastal ecosystem by promoting the distribution of riverine water, nutrients, and sediment. Louisiana's land loss is a result of natural and man induced environmental alternations. It is probable that the greatest culprit for land loss in Louisiana is a combination of natural deltaic subsidence (due to surface compaction) and the restriction of freshwater by the Mississippi River levee system. Although the LCA Study considers 166 restoration elements, including barrier island restoration, salt water barriers, and shoreline protection, elements with the greatest potential impact are the multiple freshwater and sediment reintroductions.

Naturally, the larger the plan the greater the impact, both negative and positive. General impacts of concern, such as alteration of wildlife and fisheries habitat, will be included in one of the several LCA Study Appendices set for release this summer. Other appendices of interest will address the science-based restoration for the Louisiana Gulf Coast, an ecosystem model used in program planning, and a Report by the National Technical Review Committee.

A National Technical Review Committee (NTRC) was developed to enhance the technical quality and scientific credibility of the LCA Study. The NTRC was composed of nine geographically diverse national experts in fisheries, wetland ecology, coastal hydrology, water quality, river engineering and socio-economics. The NTRC provided recommendations throughout the LCA Study process and have generally supported the LCA Study.

Under the direction of the President's FY05 budget, the study is currently refocusing study efforts to identify a "near-term program of highly cost-effective projects." Public comments on the study process are being solicited from the USACE. Please visit www.lca.gov for more information and to submit comments about the study.

Joy Merino
NOAA Fisheries