

**For More Information Contact:**  
Lynn Woods Schonberg  
800~259.0869/504-447-0868

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**Barataria~Terrebonne National Estuary Program Chair Says  
Greater Impacts from Minimal Hurricanes Due to Extensive Wetland loss**

South, LA -As investigators from Louisiana's Office of Emergency Preparedness continue to assess the damage caused by Hurricane Danny, Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program (BTNEP) chairman Windell Curole questions whether impacts from the storm were worsened due to the extensive loss of Louisiana's coastal marshes.

"One has to question whether there is a direct correlation between the loss of coastal land masses and the ability of tropical systems to maintain their strength," says Curole, who is also director of Emergency Preparedness for Lafourche Parish.

According to the BTNEP study, *"Economic Value Assessment for the Barataria-Terrebonne Estuarine System,"* wetlands protect coastal regions during storms by acting as a wave retardant, absorbing water and reducing wind damage, all functions that are particularly important to hurricane-prone coastal areas of Louisiana.

"In the past," says Curole, "these storms would diminish once the systems were in close proximity to the Louisiana coast. But when Topical Storm Danny grew into a hurricane while virtually centered over Grand Isle, it seems as though the increase of water surface in Barataria Bay allowed the storm to maintain its energy system."

The recently released BTNEP poster, *"Lower Barataria-Terrebonne Estuarine Basins Habitat Change: 1956-1988/90,"* states that over 400,000 acres of marsh in the lower Barataria and Terrebonne Basins were converted to open water between 1956 and 1988/90. In the Barataria Basin alone, the percentage of open-water area increased from 44 percent to 62 percent.

"Now that the majority of our coastal area is open water, tropical storms and low-category hurricanes present a greater flood risk," says Curole, manager of the Hurricane Protection System in Lafourche. He closed the floodgates at Golden Meadow last Thursday due to the impending storm.

"Twenty to thirty year's ago, our coastal regions were able to absorb impacts from a minimal hurricane. But today, since we are losing our marshes at a rapid rate, Hurricane Danny became a greater threat to us," says Curole.

The habitat change poster, which shows land-cover and wetland maps from 1956, 1978 and 1988/90, states that land loss rates for the lower Barataria-Terrebonne Estuarine System were 19.6 square miles per year from 1956 to 1978, and 22 square miles per year for 1978 to 1988/90.

“One of benefits of our coastal wetlands is that they dissipate storm energy and lessen the impacts of storm surges,” says Kerry St. Pé, Acting Director for the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program. “As coastal Wetlands disappear, so do those wetland benefits, and the impacts to people become greater in terms of property damage and associated costs.”

The BTNEP economic value study estimates that if a one-mile wide band of wetlands on the coast were to disappear, the expected damage would increase by \$8,319,152 annually. The study also states that damages would increase by \$185.53 per year, per coastal wetland acre lost. Damage estimates include effects from both wind and flooding.

Another analysis in the same study, which assumes that approximately 80 percent of the coastal Louisiana wetlands existing in 1993 will subside by the year 2083, indicates that as wetlands recede the annualized costs associated with preventing inundation by storm surges (building levees) in New Orleans, Houma, Morgan City, Thibodaux and Abbeville will total \$280 to \$904 per acre of wetland loss.

“The question is simple: we can expend the effort now to slow down wetlands loss, or, pay a higher price in the future for more levee construction and greater property damage from storms,” says St. Pé. “The choice is ours, but as each hurricane season passes, we’re losing our options.”

The Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program is a joint effort between citizens, business and all levels of government to solve environmental problems in the nationally-significant region.

St. Pé, the Bayou Lafourche Regional Coordinator for Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality and past chairman of the BTNEP Scientific-Technical Committee, began serving as the program's acting director on June 30, 1997. Curole formerly served as the BTNEP Local Governments Committee chair, and is currently chairman of the BTNEP Management Conference.

For more information about the program, or to receive a free copy of the habitat change poster and economic value assessment report, contact the program office headquartered on Nicholls State University campus at (504) 447-0868 or toll-free (800) 259-0869.

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