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Delta Chapter of the Sierra Club
Gulf Restoration Network
Louisiana Audubon Council
Louisiana Purchase Cypress Legacy Project
Mississippi River Basin Alliance
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For Immediate Release

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**Louisiana Conservation Groups Call for Expanded Protection
of State’s Cypress Forests**

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Baton Rouge, May 16 – A coalition of conservation and environmental organizations from across Louisiana called for expanded protection for the state’s endangered cypress forests.

“We are calling for protection of Louisiana’s cypress forests to be made a major priority,” stated Doug Daigle, Lower River Program Director of the Mississippi River Basin Alliance, “as a cooperative effort by the state, federal agencies, and private landowners.”

While Louisiana’s wetlands face a number of serious threats, such as coastal land loss and development, the urgency of this situation is being fueled by the prospect of widespread clearcutting of Louisiana cypress forests to feed a growing market in cypress garden mulch.

“At a time when Louisiana is asking the nation to expand its investment in saving our coast, allowing large areas of cypress forests to be turned into mulch would deliver exactly the wrong message,” said Barry Kohl, Conservation Chair of the Louisiana Audubon Council.

In addition, the groups pointed out the vital role these forests play in stabilizing the state’s coast, even as they are being stressed in many areas by sea-level rise, impoundments that block natural drainage patterns, and lack of freshwater and nutrients because of levees that cut them off from the Mississippi River.

Scientists Affirm Importance of Cypress Forests and Threats to their Future

The seriousness of these concerns led Governor Blanco to appoint a Science Working Group last year to study the condition of Louisiana’s coastal forests. That group has issued its final report, which can be found at www.coastalforestswg.lsu.edu.

“The report by the Governor’s Science Working Group shows clearly the vital role that forested wetlands, especially cypress-tupelo forests, play for fish and wildlife, migratory birds, and waterfowl in Louisiana,” said Daigle. “They also play a major role in flood control and improving water quality. An added benefit is that they are major carbon sinks, which is an important factor in climate change.”

The report concluded that because of higher water levels, many of these forests are unable to regenerate naturally if logged, and many may not be able to be regrown through reforestation efforts. The report also pointed to a lack of knowledge about the actual condition of many forested wetlands in Louisiana.

“The Science Working Group report pointed out some real knowledge gaps about the state of remaining forested wetlands and what’s happening out on the landscape,” said Daigle. “This lack of data, coupled with the threats faced by these forests, calls for a cautious approach in their management.”

“The report states plainly that many of these forests are disappearing,” said Kohl, “but the public needs to understand that even cypress forests that are slowly dying can survive for decades or a century, giving us time to restore hydrology and improve ecosystem health in many areas, if there’s a swamp left to restore.”

One of Louisiana’s planned coastal restoration projects will feature a reintroduction of river water into the Maurepas Swamp, a relic swamp that has been in decline due to lack of freshwater and nutrients.¹

Turning Swamps into Mulch?

“We are especially concerned about the threat to Louisiana’s cypress forests posed by logging for mulch,” said Cyn Sarthou, Executive Director of the Gulf Restoration Network. “While companies that make cypress boards and flooring have often sold mulch as a by-product, there are now operators who are strictly mulch producers. This kind of logging has the potential to affect large areas of coastal forests.”

Florida experienced widespread clearcutting of its cypress forests for mulch over the past decade.² “Some of the same companies are moving into Louisiana,” said Sarthou, “to liquidate our state’s cypress forests. As serious as the problem is in Florida, Louisiana’s unique coastal problems make our cypress-tupelo swamps even more vulnerable.”

An added concern for Louisiana is the fact that ancient cypress trees on private land have no legal protections. The Louisiana Purchase Cypress Legacy Project has catalogued a number of cypress trees across the state that were alive at the time of the Louisiana Purchase. Many of these trees are hundreds of years old; the oldest are over 1000 years in age.

The lack of any certification system for cypress mulch means that consumers have no way of knowing how and where the mulch was produced, or any guarantee that it does not contain wood from ancient trees in relic swamps.

The benefits of cypress mulch have also been oversold. “Only the oldest trees have the heartwood that is insect and rot-resistant, and those are exactly the ones that we don’t want to see turned into mulch,” said Harvey Stern,

creator of the La. Purchase Cypress Legacy Project. “Logging the younger trees for mulch merely means that they won’t live to be bigger and older, not that you have a superior mulch.”

“Even our beloved Atchafalaya Basin swamps are threatened,” stated Dean Wilson, Director of the Atchafalaya Basinkeeper Project. “The federal government has invested millions of dollars in conservation and timber easements for the preservation of the Atchafalaya Basin swamps, where cypress forests play a critical role in holding the land together.”

Finally, consumers need to know that there are many alternatives to cypress mulch, such as pine straw, which are in abundant supply and can be used without the high environmental cost to forested wetlands.

Need for Consistent State Policy

Governor Blanco has convened an Advisory Panel of agencies and stakeholders to make recommendations on state policy, in conjunction with the conclusions of the Science Working Group.

“We’re concerned that some state agencies have been promoting the expansion of cypress mulch operations in Louisiana,” said Maurice Coman, Conservation Chair of the Delta Chapter of the Sierra Club, “and that public money has gone to support some of these operations without the sustainability of the resource being assessed beforehand.³ Now that we have the Science Working Group report, we need to utilize that information to shape responsible policy, even as we continue to study these forests.”

“The state needs to speak with one voice on this issue,” stated Coman , “and it needs to be clear that all interests are working with the Governor.”

The Louisiana legislature expressed its commitment to establishing coastal forest reserves in Louisiana in the resolution SCR 75, passed in the Regular Session 2004, which urged the U.S. Congress to support such a measure.⁴

“We need our Congressional delegation to be working to help protect endangered cypress forests in Louisiana,” said Cathy Coates, Conservation Chairperson of the Baton Rouge Audubon Society, “by finding and

leveraging federal funds, and sending a clear message that the state is serious about treating its coastal resources responsibly.”

Louisiana conservation groups have called upon the Governor, Congressional delegation, state and federal agencies, and private interests to work together to save Louisiana’s cypress swamps. “We need to devote resources to saving endangered swamps, articulate sustainable use, and develop innovative incentive programs for landowners based on the many natural benefits that society receives from these forests,” said Daigle. “For Louisiana, failure to save its cypress swamps is not an option.”

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¹<http://www.lacoast.gov/reports/fsr/PO29%20Final%20EPA%20Report%202003%20final%20version.pdf>

² www.napa.ufl.edu/oldnews/mulch.htm

³ The Louisiana Department of Economic Development has given financial assistance to a cypress mulch plant constructed at Krotz Springs, La.

⁴ www.legis.state.la.us/leg_docs/04RS/CVT8/OUT/0000LHDY.PDF