



MEDIA RELEASE

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SIERRA CLUB APPLAUDS PROGRESS SINCE KATRINA, LISTS WHAT STILL MUST BE DONE TO PROTECT REGION

NEW ORLEANS – Hurricane Katrina visited its devastating fury on the Gulf Coast one year ago. While many troubling questions remain unanswered and many essential tasks remain undone, some encouraging signs have also emerged. Renewed attention has been given to the environment and the consequences of environmental destruction.

“Hurricane Katrina underscored the idea that environmental destruction and degradation can have a very significant impact on us and our economy,” says Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club. “For decades, we ignored the potential consequences and allowed the Gulf Coast to become industrialized by the petrochemical industry and others—showing that offshore drilling and other activities have serious onshore implications. We built an unstable and environmentally untenable system of levees of canals. All of this severely undermined the wetlands along the coast—an important natural barrier against hurricanes. Unfortunately, those least responsible for these choices seem to have paid most dearly.”

The severity of problems caused by Katrina has brought a new sense of urgency to environmental issues and political leaders are responding by advancing a more positive environmental agenda. In Louisiana, Governor Blanco filed a lawsuit against further sales of offshore leases, citing damage to coastal environments. She also exercised her veto against liquefied natural gas facilities that would use a fish-killing open-loop system. Governor Riley of Alabama threatened a similar veto, causing a proposed LNG port to be withdrawn. In Mississippi,

the Pascagoula City Council is questioning DuPont's proposal to dispose of the toxin PFOA in the city's sewer system.

"These government officials recognize that the environment matters and that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," says Pope. "It's very unfortunate that it took something as monumental as Katrina, but I am very encouraged that politicians are moving forward to reverse some of the damage already done and protect vital areas from new destruction."

The rebuilding process has allowed communities and homeowners to take a step back and assess how they want to rebuild. There are signs that communities and individuals are taking the terrible devastation wrought by Katrina and turning it into an opportunity to rebuild smarter and greener. For example, Holy Cross in New Orleans has created, with the assistance of universities and others, a vision of new communities and is planning how to implement that vision.

"It's critical that we heed Katrina's lessons," says Pope. "We can rebuild homes that conserve and even create energy. We can re-create communities that are resilient and sustainable. We can restore coastal ecosystems, which will protect our levees and our communities. It is critical that we re-think our energy policy and address the affects of global warming."

In New Orleans, there are signs of progress, as well as lingering questions. In the rush to dispose of hurricane debris, the Chef Menteur landfill was allowed to operate outside of environmental regulations. In a victory for environmental and community advocates, the landfill recently was closed.

"We commend New Orleans Mayor Nagin for his actions that have allowed the closure of the Chef Menteur landfill," says Leslie March, chair of the Sierra Club Delta (Louisiana) Chapter. "This landfill posed an immediate threat to the neighboring Vietnamese community and a long-term threat to the wetlands and wildlife refuge surrounding it. Disposing of hurricane-created debris must be done in ways that do not create a toxic legacy for future generations."

The Mississippi River Gulf Outlet is another contentious issue that has energized environmental advocates in the New Orleans area. This shipping channel is of major concern to

many in the area. It drastically worsened the impact of storm surge in the city and played a key role in destroying some of the city's protective marshes and wetlands. The Sierra Club has joined with other groups to call for the closure of the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, the restoration of coastal marshes, and the protection of barrier islands from damaging offshore drilling.

“During Katrina, the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet proved to be an arrow of death straight into the heart of New Orleans,” says March. “In addition, MRGO has contributed to the death of coastal marshes and cypress forests that lie between New Orleans and open water. We can never know how much a healthy coastal marsh and forest ecosystem could have reduced the storm surge that inundated the city – but Katrina showed us once again that protecting the environment is necessary in order to protect human beings, their communities, and our economy.”

Despite progress in some areas, Sierra Club officials from the Gulf Coast continue to lament the failure of some local and state governments to take the actions necessary to protect both people and the environment. In particular, the petrochemical industry continues to exert undue influence in the region.

“Our national and local emphasis on oil and gas development and on acquiescing to corporate requests no matter what the cost has contributed to the degraded state of the layers of defenses that used to protect New Orleans and the Gulf Coast,” says March. “We can learn to respect and protect our environment, and we can correct some of the mistakes of the past. The environment matters if we want resilient communities that are safer from future storms.”

In addition to the destruction of the natural barriers protecting the Gulf Coast from hurricanes, evidence has emerged of other immediate environmental problems. Air, water, and soil toxicity continue to be of concern. Government agencies failed to immediately assess or remediate the effect of toxic chemicals in the water and soil after the floodwaters receded.

“Our state and federal agencies dropped the ball on protecting us from toxic chemicals following the initial stages of this disaster,” says Becky Gillette, chair of the Sierra Club’s Mississippi Chapter. “The regulatory agencies waived health, safety and environmental laws during the cleanup, and as a result many residents and volunteer relief workers were exposed to pollution that could cause an increase in health problems like what is being seen from workers and residents exposed to toxics after 9/11.”

Dr. Peter DeFur, associate professor, Center for Environmental Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, conducts research on environmental health and ecological risk assessment, and concurs with Gillette. He evaluated air quality data gathered by EPA after Katrina and in a report produced for the Sierra Club, wrote, “It appears that in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina residents were exposed to concentrations of air pollution that could significantly affect respiratory function. EPA and state regulatory agencies failed to adequately sample or address problems which led to an inability to assess risks from air pollution.”

The trailers provided to evacuees by FEMA illustrate another troubling example of the absence of government oversight and protection. FEMA failed to assess and remediate the high levels of formaldehyde found to be present in these trailers. The Sierra Club stepped in to provide air test kits and focus attention on yet another problem foisted on Katrina evacuees due to government incompetence.

“We were alerted to a problem, and provided air test kits to a number of people living in FEMA trailers in Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi,” says Gillette. “More than 83% of the samples we took exceeded residential standards for formaldehyde in the air. People’s lives were damaged when Katrina took their homes – now their health is being damaged because FEMA won’t take action to remediate this problem.”

“Katrina showed us the terrible power of nature,” says Pope. “We can no longer ignore the consequences of unbridled oil and gas development, the destruction of key natural features like marshes and wetlands, and danger of locating industrial facilities in the heart of our communities. Although many concerns remain, I am heartened by the positive accomplishments I have seen in the Gulf Coast and remain hopeful that our political leaders will heed the lessons we learned as the rebuilding process continues.”

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The Sierra Club's 750,000 members work together to protect communities and the planet. The Club is America's oldest, largest and most influential grassroots environmental organization. The Delta (Louisiana) chapter of the Sierra Club has more than 3,500 members and has been active in local conservation projects for more than 30 years. For more information, contact the organization's website: www.louisiana.sierraclub.org.