



MEDIA RELEASE

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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SIERRA CLUB REPEATS CALL TO SHUT DOWN THE MRGO

NEW ORLEANS – The Sierra Club of Louisiana is renewing its call for closure of the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, known locally as “Mr. Go.” The organization, whose mission is to explore, enjoy and protect the planet, joins many other groups in calling on Congress to reconsider the 76-mile waterway that connects the Mississippi River with the Gulf of Mexico.

The outlet, a 36-foot deep shortcut from the Port of New Orleans Inner Harbor Navigation Canal to the Gulf of Mexico, has been a controversial project since its inception.

“If you needed a poster child for the destruction of wetlands, the MRGO would serve the role quite well,” says Darryl Malek-Wiley. “It has destroyed roughly 27,000 acres of wetlands and 38,000 more acres have undergone substantial changes in habitat. Because of erosion, the width of the channel has increased from 650 feet to more than 2,000 feet – more than three times as big as it was originally dredged. This sharply increases its potential to serve as a conduit during hurricanes.”

The dredging of MRGO allowed salt water from the Gulf of Mexico to flow inland into the marshes of St. Bernard Parish, killing plants and vegetation which held land and soil in place. Without the plants and vegetation, the land and soil eroded, leading

to a widening of the MRGO beyond the dimensions originally authorized, and creating what environmentalists now call “a hurricane highway.”

The wetland loss and deterioration from the MRGO allow tidal waters to push further inland, increasing the flooding risk to interior portions of St. Bernard Parish and providing a direct line of access for hurricane-related storm surge to reach St. Bernard Parish.

MRGO was completed in 1965 at a cost of \$92 million. It originally was billed as an economic boon to New Orleans and St. Bernard Parish, although opposition developed even before it opened. A 1958 U.S. Department of Interior report warned of major ecological change with widespread ecological consequences if the channel was dredged.

“Local political interests wanted MRGO so much that they ignored warnings about the damage that would result to vital coastal wetlands,” explains Malek-Wiley. “If today’s environmental laws had been in place, MRGO probably would not have been built. Instead, the risk was ignored and we can see the results – long-term destruction of the marshes that protected us, and in one catastrophic event, loss of people’s lives and total destruction of their neighborhoods.”

During Katrina, the MRGO and a second channel, the Intracoastal Waterway, acted as a giant funnel that sent the storm’s surge shooting into the Industrial Canal, knocking down levees in its path. Levees along MRGO were breached in approximately 20 places along its length, directly flooding most of Saint Bernard Parish and New Orleans East. Storm surge from MRGO also is suspected in the three breaches of the Industrial Canal.

“It is time to realize that the MRGO should be closed and the wetlands restored to their original ecological purpose,” says Malek-Wiley. “Taking steps now that will protect people in the future is far more cost-effective than clinging to a little-used channel that killed people during Hurricane Katrina. MRGO has not fulfilled its original promise. Instead, it has done far more damage than anyone ever dreamed. MRGO is perhaps the most potent symbol of all that was wrong with our past disregard for Louisiana's coastal environment.”

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The Sierra Club's members are 700,000 of your friends and neighbors. Inspired by nature, we work together to protect our 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.