



MEDIA RELEASE

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Six Months After Hurricane Katrina Struck, Sierra Club Calls for Renewed Sense of Urgency

NEW ORLEANS – Though Hurricane consumption was the custom on Fat Tuesday, New Orleans residents resumed hurricane recovery and prevention on Ash Wednesday, the six-month anniversary of the worst natural disaster in U.S. history.

“We hope everyone had a wonderful Mardi Gras,” says Leslie March, chair of the Louisiana Sierra Club. “But now it’s time to tackle the problems facing the Gulf Coast. It’s important to stay focused on the most important task facing us – making our region safer before the next hurricane season begins on June 1.”

The Sierra Club has identified four basic tasks necessary to prepare for the next hurricane season.

- Identify the weaknesses in the hurricane defense system.
- Repair the levees to Category 3 protection levels.
- Close the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet.
- Develop an emergency evacuation plan and reliable communication system.

In addition, rebuilding after hurricanes Katrina and Rita has given environmentalists, politicians and government officials the chance to become visionaries, says March. She says it’s a golden opportunity, a chance to correct the mistakes of the past.

Beginning in the 1940s, the coastal wetlands of the Gulf Coast have been under siege and are so severely degraded that they no longer can provide a healthy buffer for storm surge.

“It took a major hurricane to bring serious attention to the loss of wetlands and how they protect people,” says March. “Now everyone realizes that this is a problem that must be solved. Let’s keep the momentum going. Let’s not lose this chance to repair the Gulf Coast.”

March says the goal of the Sierra Club's Gulf Coast Environmental Restoration Project is to engage the communities hardest hit by Hurricane Katrina in the rebuilding process and to support environmental and public health policies that will protect people from the impact of storms in the future. During the next year, the Sierra Club has the following objectives:

- Give organizing assistance to communities in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi to ensure that their voices are a part of the rebuilding process.
- Educate Gulf Coast communities about water-quality issues in impacted areas (both surface water and drinking water) and give water-sampling training and assistance to residents.
- Promote improved handling of toxic substances, including rethinking how they are stored and transported.
- Organize volunteer participation in public planning processes for rebuilding communities.

“We recently worked with the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association to help clean up their yards and streets,” says March. “Caring about New Orleans means caring for the areas that were flooded – even in simple ways like planting flowers.”

The Sierra Club hopes to educate the public and administrative decision-makers about the need to invest in fuel economy, green-building, energy conservation measures, and diversification of energy supplies to include renewables.

“Economic well-being and quality of life in the region are linked to a good environment. We can promote smart-growth and transportation choices, and support energy conservation and clean-energy options,” says March. “We need to reconsider the folly of destroying coastal wetlands and other special places in a search for dwindling supplies of oil.”

March says the Gulf Coast needs to rebuild with vision and innovation. “We have a lot of work to do and the Sierra Club will use its voice to ensure that the appropriate steps are taken during the rebuilding process.”

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The Sierra Club's 700,000 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.