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Coalition Unveils Findings on MRGO Ecosystem Recovery 15 Years After Hurricane Katrina

Report assesses impacts of channel's closure, vital restoration needs and ongoing community recovery

NEW ORLEANS (Oct. 1, 2020) — 15 years after Hurricane Katrina, the [MRGO Must Go Coalition](#) released a white paper today detailing new information about the environmental benefits of closing the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO) and the ongoing, urgent need for large-scale restoration of the ecosystem in order to protect communities from hurricanes and climate change.

The white paper, titled “MRGO: The Road to Recovery,” was compiled by the MRGO Must Go Coalition, a group of 17 local and national environmental, social justice and community organizations. The Coalition, founded in 2006 in response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, advocates for the restoration of the MRGO ecosystem. While some progress has been made and certain projects are moving forward, there is still a long way to go to restore the ecosystem and make surrounding communities safer.

The MRGO, a deep-draft shipping channel constructed in the early 1960s, subsequently destroyed and degraded vast landscapes of protective coastal wetlands. When Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, storm surge from the MRGO caused numerous levee breaches and catastrophic flooding, claiming the lives of hundreds of people in New Orleans East, the Lower Ninth Ward and St. Bernard Parish. Despite strong, organized calls for closure in the years prior to Katrina, the channel remained open until Congress closed it in 2009. MRGO negatively affected over one million acres of coastal habitat. While not foreseen at the time of federal deauthorization, the navigational closure of the MRGO has benefited Louisiana’s coastal ecosystems more than any other restoration and recovery project implemented since Hurricane Katrina.

“Building upon the ecosystem recovery, large-scale coastal restoration efforts — including building marshes, planting vegetation, restoring shorelines and freshwater reintroduction — would serve to honor communities ravaged and lives lost, while facilitating the ongoing economic recovery of the region,” said John Lopez, PhD., Pontchartrain Conservancy coast and community program director and one of the report’s three lead authors. “To accomplish this, Congress must act swiftly and deliberately, prioritizing infrastructure funding for scientifically-supported projects that ensure environmental justice.”

Since the closure of the MRGO, the entire Pontchartrain Basin has seen a restored and balanced hydrology, with salinity gradients closer to the historical conditions of the 1960s, pre-MRGO. As a result, the region will be able to support a wide array of species and habitats such as baldcypress swamp forests and oyster reefs, which also work effectively as lines of defense allowing work to be done to rebuild the vital storm surge buffer on which vulnerable communities rely.

At the same time, the ecosystem restoration recommended by the federal government, state government, conservation organizations and local communities is far from complete. Progress on small-scale projects on Bayou la Loutre Ridge, Golden Triangle, New Orleans East Landbridge, Maurepas Swamp, Lake Borgne Landbridge and Biloxi Marsh has just begun. No funding has been allocated to implement the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ MRGO ecosystem restoration plan, despite Congressional calls for action after Katrina.

“Though 15 years have passed since the storm, neither the Lower Ninth Ward, nor St. Bernard Parish, have been able to fully recover. The Lower Ninth Ward, where longstanding issues of systemic inequity continue to exist, is particularly impacted, further compounded by the lingering legacy of MRGO and its destruction of the community,” said National Wildlife Federation Gulf Program Deputy Director and report co-author Amanda Moore. “While the results of the closure on our ecosystem recovery are undeniable, we must keep pushing forward for the restoration that is needed to protect communities.”

Amid a very active hurricane season, our region remains extremely vulnerable to strong storms that have the potential to rapidly intensify and cause widespread damage. There is much work that remains to restore the MRGO ecosystem and provide a vital buffer from storms and sea level rise that can protect our communities for generations to come.

"Restoration is extremely vital to the growth and enhancement of all communities, cultures and neighborhoods in Louisiana," said Arthur Johnson, chief executive officer for the Lower 9th Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development. "The heritage and legacy of Louisiana's culture has endured the impact of the MRGO alongside our environment. The decisions of local, state and federal policymakers, regarding preserving our natural ecosystems and protecting our communities, has never been more important."

To read the complete white paper, visit <https://mrgomustgo.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/MRGO-White-Paper-10-01-2020.pdf>

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About MRGO Must Go Coalition:

The MRGO Must Go Coalition was founded in 2006 in response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The Coalition's mission is to ensure that the wetlands affected by the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO) are carefully restored in a timely manner. The MRGO Must Go Coalition includes 17 local and national environmental, social justice and community organizations. For more information, visit mrgomustgo.org.