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Guest Writer

R. King Milling

R. King Milling is the Chairman of the America's WETLAND Foundation. He also chairs the Governor's Advisory Commission on Coastal Protection, Restoration and Conservation and serves as a member of the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority of Louisiana.

In a few months, the Louisiana Legislature will consider the third iteration of its Master Plan for Coastal Protection & Restoration in Louisiana. At issue are the process, timelines and expanding costs to complete restoration projects. Certain regulations, rules and guidelines have been promulgated, which appear sensible but in practice serve to undermine the very aims of conservation, sustainability and environmental restoration. In the ensuing years since Louisiana declared war on coastal land loss, the state, private land owners, NGOs and local governments have found that the fatigue and eventual losing propositions of attaining permits to pursue restoration are overwhelming.

For more than a decade, we have tried to find a compromise to the dilemma we face with permitting processes. One solution to limitless timelines and cost overruns is to approve a "general" or "emergency" rule so that projects meeting consistency with a similar project are eligible to receive a permit based on the original project being granted.

Because 90% of land along the coast is privately owned, it is in the best interest of all these landowners to invest in projects to abate the effects of the rising tide and salt water intrusion from the Gulf of Mexico. President Obama attempted progress in unraveling the conundrum, the merry-go-round approvals of permits by multiple agencies acting singularly. This attempt at cooperative agency review and approval was a step in the right direction, no doubt, but the eventual reality is that the process timeline is not keeping pace with the loss.

Recently, America's WETLAND Foundation (with public and private partners) completed a project on the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway (GIWW) where Louisiana and the USACE have differing opinions on O&M cost obligations. This has left the waterway a literal no man's land, with shorelines compromised through widening embankments and loss of berms, adding to the erosion. The same landowner who allowed the demonstration project used an existing permit for berm restoration and the program utilizing innovative technologies was completed in a fraction of the time and at impressive low costs. A recent study by the Water Institute of the Gulf determined that the dollars for restoration could be four to five times greater if time and process factor issues were not addressed. Private landowners are a critical piece of the puzzle of coastal land loss solutions. There must be accommodation for allowing their lands to be restored without relinquishing title and through an expedited process of permitting that places restoration as an urgent national priority.

While the State of Louisiana moves to implement its master plan, solutions involving partnerships between the public and private sectors will hold the line on coastal land loss and provide a successful transition to larger scale projects. Bringing innovation and solutions through demonstration programs will allow threatened coastal regions to replicate these projects under a general permit. We can employ efficiencies for large-scale federal and state cooperative projects and smaller projects with a streamlined process that will provide the incentives critical to attracting private landowners and companies to invest in broad-scale restoration. Our success depends on both the large and incremental programs to meet this enormous challenge. Recognition by decision makers at all levels that we can get the job done in a different, more cost and time efficient way and maintain adequate protections of the environment is critical. For more information, visit americaswetland.com.