

SAVE OUR LAKE

LAKE PONTCHARTRAIN BASIN FOUNDATION

March 21, 2002

Admiral James D. Watkins, Chairman
U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy
1120 20th St., NW, Ste. 200 North
Washington, DC 20036

Re: Comments offered at Public Hearing, New Orleans, LA, March 7, 2002

Dear Admiral Watkins and Members of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy,

The Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation (LPBF) supports the ongoing efforts of the Commission to bring coastal issues to the nation's attention. In that regard, we appreciate the opportunity to bring our concerns about wetland loss and coastal development to the attention of the Commission.

The Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation was established in 1989 as a citizen-based, non-profit organization. Our mission is to restore and protect the lands and waters of the 4,700 mi² Lake Pontchartrain Basin, which we accomplish through restoration activities, education, advocacy, monitoring of the regulatory process, and citizen action. Lake Pontchartrain exchanges water with the Gulf of Mexico through the Rigolets and Chef Menteur Passes, making Lake Pontchartrain one of the largest estuaries along the Gulf Coast and an important component of the Gulf's health.

Lake Pontchartrain has had a tremendous influence on shaping the local cultural of southeastern Louisiana, and touches the lives of the more than 1.5 million people who reside here. Lake Pontchartrain also serves as an important economic force for the area. Recent research, for example, has found that a healthy, clean Lake Pontchartrain Basin would contribute \$1.2 billion annually to the local economy.

Currently, one of the major challenges facing the Pontchartrain Basin is rapid growth and unplanned development, which is resulting in tremendous wetland loss. Many people at the state and local levels bemoan the fact that Louisiana is losing between 25,000-40,000 square miles of coastal wetlands annually to natural processes. There is more to the picture of wetland loss, however, when wetland permits granted under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act are considered. The Section 404 program is overseen by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

In the Pontchartrain Basin, wetland permits continue to be issued at an alarming rate, converting farms, forests, and wetlands, into subdivisions, shopping centers, and businesses. This scenario can be stamped across the entire Louisiana coast and beyond. For example, in one of the Pontchartrain Basin's sixteen parishes (i.e. counties), urban growth alone was responsible for destroying more than 51,000 acres of wetlands over the 18-year period between 1982-2000. Essentially our ecosystem is experiencing death by a thousand cuts.



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Under the Section 404 program in the State of Louisiana, in 2000, Section 404 permits were issued for at least 775 acres of tidal wetlands; this required 1,200 acres of mitigation. In 2001, 520 acres of wetlands were permitted, which required 1,200 acres of mitigation. These numbers represent 2-5% of the nation's coastal wetlands loss. Importantly, these figures only represent direct impacts; they do not include indirect impacts.

Recently, Louisiana's governor made a request from Congress to fund a state coastal restoration program to the tune of \$15 billion dollars.

When we consider this funding request to restore what is being lost with the fact that wetlands are actively being destroyed in our state, it is obvious that there is a clear disconnect between coastal restoration and the Section 404 permitting program in Louisiana.

This is a schizophrenic philosophy – on one hand advocating wetlands restoration by asking Congress for more dollars, while on the other hand, permits are granted to destroy more wetlands. Clearly, this two-sided mindset will only serve to promote further coastal wetland loss.

During this process, the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation asks that the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy take a serious look at coastal development and the role of wetlands in coastal ocean policy, and recognize the need to protect our coastal resources be addressed by enhancing, strengthening, and developing additional protections for them.

We look forward to the recommendations the Commission is charged with developing to ensure continued support for our ocean and coastal resources, and the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation stands ready to assist in the Commission's efforts to further protect and promote a healthy, sustainable coastal ecosystem for this and future generations.

Respectfully submitted,



Neil Armingeon
Environmental Director
Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation