



Mayor Mitchell J. Landrieu

Fighting for Survival Conference

Tulane University

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Prepared Remarks

Your Excellencies, Ministers, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you so much for joining us in New Orleans at this important time in our city's and this region's history.

This week, we commemorate the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, both a natural and man-made disaster which killed over 1836 American citizens and flooded 80% of a great international city.

We are reeling from the man-made BP oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. After three long months, the runaway well in the Gulf is capped, but the die has been cast, and over 200 million gallons of oil need to be cleaned up to save one of the most significant yet delicate ecosystems in the world.

In the Caribbean, our brothers and sisters in Haiti face an uncertain future after the catastrophic earthquake earlier this year. The television cameras have packed up and gone, but millions still wonder whether they will ever again have a roof over their heads or a full stomach at the end of a restless night.

Three very different disasters with similar strains. Vibrant cultures in an upheaval. Historic inequity exposed. Fragile socioeconomic systems pushed to the brink.

The effects of these disasters will be felt for generations.

It's often been said that the only thing we learn from history is that we do not learn from history.

But we, as powerful voices in our communities, have the power to change that. The question is, do we have the will? Can we find a way or make one?

Sustainable development is a challenge we face as we rebuild. Short-term solutions will no longer suffice. Storms are more powerful and destructive. Category 5 storms are coming. We need long-term protection from hurricanes. We must, once and for all, fully restore the most important wetlands for America's energy, economic, and national security. And looking to the future, we must prepare for the unpredictable impact climate change will have on coastal communities.

These are some of the world's most complicated challenges and also some of the most costly to address. But we have no choice but face them head on. We must remember that it's not just a matter of our way of life; it's a matter of life and death.

It is because of Katrina, the BP oil catastrophe, and the depth of our problems, that New Orleans is uniquely poised to chart a new way forward. We are rebuilding from the ground up and attempting to set the standard for community renewal and sustainable development. We are, in fact, the most immediate laboratory for innovation and change, and our success or failure will be the symbol for America's ability to accomplish great things, or not.

But for both Katrina and the BP oil catastrophe, our future is not just about survival. It's about resurrection. It's about redemption. It's about getting this right, for now and for generations to come.

For New Orleans, hurricanes are nothing new. I remember as a kid, we'd batten down the hatches, mama would empty the ice box, the power went out early, and school closed for a few days as the neighborhood cleaned up. That was it. Betsy in 1965 was the last really big storm which devastated entire sections of the city. My generation never fully appreciated the power of the Gulf simply because none of us had seen what it could do. But Katrina humbled us. It was a rude awakening to the dangers we face. These storms must be respected. And we must be better prepared.

Katrina was a massive storm that packed a powerful punch. And even though much of New Orleans is below sea level, the real problem was a weak system of federal levees and a canal system that funneled millions of gallons of water to the city's core.

We are not alone in living below sea level. A study released in March ranked New Orleans sixth among thirteen large metro areas on the Atlantic Coast at risk of catastrophic loss from hurricanes. Globally, the Netherlands exists because it is protected by a complex system of levees and flood gates. Hurricanes provide an additional threat, but there is a model that can keep us safe.

But enhanced flood control systems are only part of the solution. Preparedness by both government and residents are of key importance. New Orleans readies for a storm by implementing new technologies to alert citizens of impending threats. We coordinate across geographic boundaries. Large-scale evacuations are better planned. We stage materials and supplies for deployment. There is clear command and control. And most of all we are vigilant of the threats we face.

In 2008 Hurricane Gustav showed how much we have improved these systems and our effectiveness. We moved over a million residents out of the region. Never again will we see the desperation, anarchy, and helplessness on the streets of New Orleans like in those four horrific days in 2005.

But Gustav brought to bear a challenge coastal communities know all too well. New Orleans was spared from a direct hit, but further inland communities that historically had been beyond hurricanes' reach before were severely impacted. The protective shield provided by our barrier islands and wetlands has disappeared.

Before the threats to the coast posed by the BP oil catastrophe, Louisiana's wetlands – America's wetlands - were already the fastest disappearing delta on the planet. For almost one hundred years, the Louisiana coast has been slashed and burned. Since 1930, over 1,900 square miles of wetlands have been lost. The area lost is the same size as the metro areas of Washington D.C., Houston, New York, Atlanta, Denver, and Los Angeles---combined.

Every year, 15,300 acres of coast evaporate into the Gulf. By the time I finish this speech, another acre of America will have vanished. We are committing coastal suicide while weakening our country and putting our people at risk.

Without the wetlands southern Louisiana is exposed to even greater risks from hurricanes. For every three miles of marshland a storm surge is reduced by nearly one foot. And as this buffer shrinks, the two million people who live in the coastal parishes of Louisiana may soon face a choice between their beloved community and their family's safety. No one should be forced to make such a choice.

It's important to note that the destruction of Louisiana wetlands is a direct result of human actions, not Mother Nature. Over the past 70 years levee and dam construction in Midwest and Plains states have stopped the natural flow of the river from depositing sediments that build up marshes and estuaries.ⁱ Fertilizer runoff from farming in Iowa and Illinois creates a noxious cloud that kills everything in its path as it traverses down the Mississippi River.

That runoff creates a 'dead zone' that chokes off life in the Gulf over an astounding 7,700 square mile area.

Most damaging, though, are the oil companies' 10,000 miles of canals and pipelines that snake through our marshes and bring oil and gas to onshore refineries in order to provide energy for the people of this country.ⁱⁱ The dredging for pipelines and canals allow saltwater from the Gulf to flood and poison our wetlands.

Islands vanish, rows of trees are submerged, and waves lick close to our homes and our communities. It seems to have happened so quickly, but really it is generations in the making. The BP catastrophe has accelerated the destruction and heightened the awareness of how close to the brink we really are.

Times Picayune writer Bob Marshall said that with 200 million gallons of oil in the Gulf, "Our coast is like a cancer patient who has come down with pneumonia."

The pneumonia is serious, but "after the fever breaks, he'll still have cancer." And if all we do is clean up the oil, we will have cured the pneumonia, not the cancer, but we will have missed the bigger point and squandered the opportunity to make lasting changes to save our home and make our country strong again.ⁱⁱⁱ

The people of the Gulf Coast face this reality every day.

By focusing on higher short-term profits instead of long-term sustainability, we are greedily robbing resources from future generations. Decades of backroom political deals have left the coast defiled. Poor funding decisions by the state and local governments have added to its demise. The federal government is taking billions of dollars of revenue from our shores and redistributing it to other parts of the country. National

environmental groups cluster on the east and west coasts, leaving local officials and environmental groups on the Gulf Coast to fend for themselves.

It is time to change course, innovate, adapt, and hope for a better future. But hope is no substitute for a plan. We know how to restore our coast. We know the importance of land-building diversions and sediment pumping systems. Some of the country's best minds have dedicated their lives to solving this problem. We have the way -- now we need the will and the resources.

But it's also a matter of economic sense. The world's economy cannot exist without coastal communities. We are gateways-- key trading points to vast natural resources, and abundant energy sources.

In Louisiana, we have been the tip of the spear in this nation's fight for our economic, energy, and national security.

Every year, Louisiana provides America with more oil and gas than the nation imports from Saudi Arabia. Americans consume 21 million barrels of oil a day. Only eight million is produced domestically – 25% of which comes from the Gulf of Mexico.

Louisiana is home to five of this nation's top 15 busiest ports. We are the entryway for the nation's goods, with 460 million tons of cargo annually shipped down the Mississippi to the world and moved up the river to the heartland.

And let us not take for granted that Louisiana's coast is the nursery of the Gulf, home to the second largest fishing industry in America, annually accounting for 30% of all seafood consumed in the country.

So whether it is food, clothing, metals, or oil, the rest of America can rely on us to put food on the table, keep the lights on and gas in their tanks.

We must preserve and protect what we have left. American President Theodore Roosevelt, set the course, writing, "It is not what we have that will make us a great nation; it is the way in which we use it."^{IV} It is time to stop exploiting our resources in a way that is economically hypocritical, environmentally ignorant, and morally wrong.

Looking to the future, we know the threat of climate change looms. And it looms especially large for coastal communities like all of us gathered today. As the earth warms, water levels rise. That's a matter of science, not opinion. It can be seen happening all over the world and will further complicate our flood protection and coastal land loss issues.

We can change. We must. The legacy of Katrina & Rita, the BP oil catastrophe, and the earthquake in Haiti, will be defined by our actions now.

The restoration of our coast will show the world how the government, businesses and people, acting in concert, can protect the Gulf Coast and turn crisis into opportunity.

Frustration into motivation. Tragedy into triumph.

Imagine coastal communities that are protected from national disasters by innovative flood protection structures and a fully-restored coast.

Our children and grandchildren live and will work in the Gulf and Caribbean. We will not leave our homes because we failed to innovate and adapt. Because we failed to learn from past mistakes. Because we failed to act.

This moment will define the 21st century and we cannot afford to fail. The challenge has been laid before us. It will test our resolve. The world is watching to see if we, as a society, can still do great things.

But, we have been here before, faced challenges as large and as difficult. And we have overcome.

Again and again, our will has been tested.

And together, we will find a way or make one.

ⁱ <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/apr/23/opinion/oe-barry23>

ⁱⁱ http://www.nola.com/news/gulf-oil-spill/index.ssf/2010/05/oil_and_gas_company_developmen.html

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/28/opinion/28friedman.html>

^{iv} http://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/TR_Dakota_July4.asp