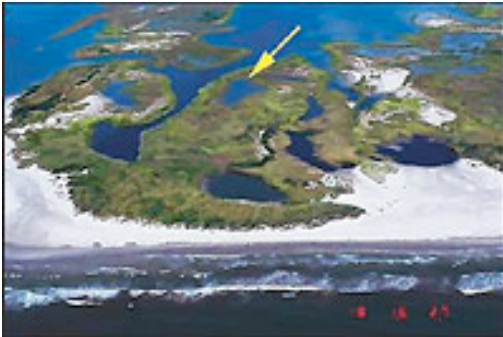


# Ohio scientist, others call for big changes to New Orleans land

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U . S . GEOLOGICAL SURVEY VIA AP  
**Aerial photographs show wetlands and barrier islands near New Orleans in July 2001 and on Aug. 31, two days after Hurricane Katrina decimated the Gulf Coast and the natural buffers.**

As New Orleans and Louisiana officials vow to rebuild the historic city, an OSU wetlands expert is joining other scientists in saying it would be a mistake to drain the water and start over.

And Bill Mitsch didn't keep his opinion to himself. He e-mailed Gov. Kathleen Blanco's office in Baton Rouge and told an official there to "let the water decide" New Orleans' new boundaries.

He and others advocate building on higher ground and restoring the wetlands and barrier islands that acted as a natural buffer against storms.

The governor hit the roof, said Mitsch, who has been working with researchers at Louisiana State University on a coastal-restoration program.

"I was suggesting that maybe New Orleans shouldn't be rebuilt the way it was before. It hit a sensitive nerve," he said.

State and federal officials vow that New Orleans will be restored. And as the water level in the city slowly drops, the rebuilding rhetoric is increasing.

"We're going to do this right. We're going to do this smartly," Blanco said during a news conference earlier this week.

Restoring the wrecked and polluted city could cost \$200 billion, said U.S. Rep. William Jefferson, who represents New Orleans.

Jefferson told The Times-Picayune, of New Orleans, that the money would be used to repair levees and the port, provide loans to the city and school systems, and help with cleanup and housing costs.

So far, there has been no mention of wetlands and barrier islands, which once acted as a natural buffer before they began to disappear.

More than 1 million acres of wetlands and barrier islands have withered away since 1930. Scientists predict another 300,000 acres will disappear by 2050 if the trend isn't reversed.

With each acre lost, the threat to New Orleans is increased, Robert Twilley, a professor of wetland science at Louisiana State University, told the San Francisco Chronicle. Twilley also is the leader of a team overseeing the marshland rehabilitation project.

While Mitsch expects politics will rule any final decision, he stressed that biology cannot be ignored.

"It makes no sense to spend any money rebuilding the city without addressing the long-overdue issue of restoring the natural features that once protected New Orleans from storms," he said.

But near New Orleans, these wetlands and barrier islands have been damaged by development, gas-and-oil extraction and a Mississippi River levee system that shunted sediment into the Gulf of Mexico instead of allowing the river to distribute it naturally along the coast.

"That's criminal what they've done," said Mitsch, who is the director of Ohio State University's Olentangy wetlands-research laboratory.

Mitsch also advises the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on wetlands restoration. He is working with LSU on research to use wetlands as far north as Ohio to reduce runoff from farm fields that eventually dump into the Mississippi River and create an oxygen-depleted "dead zone" in the Gulf of Mexico.

Aerial photos taken by the U.S. Geological Survey of the coast south of New Orleans show that Katrina badly damaged remaining wetlands and nearly obliterated the barrier islands.

What was once at least a \$14 billion restoration effort could cost \$28 billion, he said.

"New Orleans won't be safe from another storm like Katrina until we restore this hurricane buffer," Twilley told the San Francisco Chronicle.

But politicians should compare the cost of restoring wetlands and barrier islands with the \$10 billion in federal funds already allocated and the \$150 billion request Congress will take up this week, said John Day, an LSU wetlands ecologist working with Mitsch.

Protecting New Orleans is a lot more complicated than simply raising levees, Day said.

New Orleans is sinking along with the rest of southeastern Louisiana. Even if levees are raised, their heavy weight dooms them to sink.

"I don't think we should rebuild New Orleans the way it is now with most people below sea level," Day said.

Leveling and filling in flooded areas to raise most of the city to at least 12 feet above sea level should be considered, Day said.

That kind of rebuilding is not unprecedented. Galveston, Texas, was raised more than 7 feet after a hurricane and subsequent flooding destroyed the city in 1900.

Long term, New Orleans will never be the same.

"It will probably become the Venice of North America in the next century," Mitsch said. "Venice was in a delta and sank over 1,000 years. People still live there."

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