

St. Bernard Parish declares emergency over Mardi Gras Pass

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Plaquemines Parish President Amos Cormier III voiced his support for St. Bernard Parish's decision to declare a state of emergency regarding Mardi Gras Pass last week, but said Plaquemines never had much faith in the tactic.

"We did not pursue the emergency route because of our conversations with the Army Corps of Engineers. They did not deem (Mardi Gras Pass) to be an emergency. We did not share that opinion, but when you get it straight from the horse's mouth, we decided to pursue the reconstruction of the salinity control structure," said Cormier following the Plaquemines Council's June 8

meeting.

St. Bernard President Guy McInnis asked for and received a unanimous vote from his Council June 6 to declare a state of emergency regarding the hundreds of thousands of cubic feet of fresh water that are pouring into Eastbank wetlands in Plaquemines and St. Bernard Parishes, making the waters untenable for oysters ever since the Mississippi River breached a salinity control structure south of Pointe a la Hache on Mardi Gras Day in 2012.

"The governor recently declared a state of emergency on the Louisiana coast, so we're asking for a state of emergency in Plaquemines and St. Bernard for generations of oys-

ter fishermen that are losing productivity," said McInnis. "There's an urgency here. If we haven't lost this industry yet, oyster fishermen are telling us they're going to lose it. This is going to ruin generations of culture and family businesses."

Because the breach is in Plaquemines, it's Plaquemines' responsibility to ask the proper state agencies to plug the hole. And the parish has. The Plaquemines Council approved \$30,000 in December 2016 to pay Newell Engineering of Metairie to draft a permit application to present to the state to close the pass. That application was originally intended for

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the Corps, but Plaquemines District 1 Council member John Barthelemy, whose district includes Mardi Gras Pass, said it's currently "on hold" with the state Office of Coastal Management, which recently requested additional information on the matter.

"The Corps told us it didn't matter whether we close (Mardi Gras Pass) or not. It has no impact on them as far as the operation of the Mississippi River," said Barthelemy. "But it's steady getting wider. Eventually it's going to cause serious damage to a lot of people's property."

Further complicating the matter is the utility of Mardi Gras Pass. It's one of several natural cuts in the river creating new land in the Louisiana gulf, just as planned man-made diversions like the Mid-Barataria Diversion near Myrtle Grove in Plaquemines Parish are intended to do in order to slow storm surges. St. Bernard At Large West Council member Kerri Callais voiced her belief that Mardi Gras Pass is destroying more land than it's creating, but Dr. John Lopez, director of the Coastal Stability Program for the Lake Ponchartrain Basin Foundation, says that's not the case.

"Twelve acres of what was land five to six years ago (near Mardi Gras Pass) is now water. However, we calculated the volume of sediment around the area could create 170 acres of wetlands," said Lopez.

Lopez said that potential land exists now as non-vegetative mudflats but, given time, it will sprout plants whose roots will bind the sediment together, giving it more strength to resist an incoming storm surge. In fact, Lopez said some diversions can take up to 20 years to yield land, but Mardi Gras Pass is already forming the sedimentary basis for land after just five years.

While the state's declaration of emergency may have the practical effect of fast-tracking projects in the Coastal Protection & Restoration Authority's Master Plan (like the Mid-Barataria Diversion), cutting through red tape like environmental studies, McInnis said he's not certain what effect St. Bernard's declaration will have on the state's reaction to Mardi Gras Pass.

"I figured, on our end, we have to make a statement if nothing else," he said.