

Stakeholder* Exercise

NOTE: This exercise is based on a real coastal environmental management problem facing policymakers, but certain information is fictional or modified for purpose of this exercise. Some of the stakeholders are based in part on real individuals identified from news sources and public documents, but supplemental fictional information has been added, which may not accurately reflect the positions or views of the individuals on whom they are based. (Other characters are entirely fictional.) I have no insight into this project beyond what is publicly available, and this may not accurately depict the real events or facts.

Background

Louisiana's coast is losing land faster than anywhere on earth. In the 1930s a levee system was constructed to prevent flooding and damage to communities along the Mississippi River. This system permanently cuts the river and the land-building sediment off from the deltas, exacerbating the loss of land. Without mitigation, experts have predicted that Louisiana will lose an additional 4,000 square miles of land in the next 50 years, resulting in nearly \$20 billion in annual damage and impacts on industry, navigation, storm surge vulnerability, and damaged communities.

In response, the Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) has designed a mid-basin sediment diversion plan. The plan proposes two sediment diversions intended to transport sediment from the river and into the disappearing wetlands, helping to build between 13,000 and 26,000 acres of land over the next 50 years. These plans are based on extensive modeling and real-world data collected by scientists.

The project is funded largely from damages from the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. According to the project website (<https://midbasin.coastal.la.gov/faqs>) the benefits include:

- “Land Building: The Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion has the capability to build and sustain an estimated 13,000 to 26,000 acres (about 20 to 40 square miles) of wetlands, depending on the rate of future sea level rise.
- Benefits to Wildlife, Animals, and Aquatic Species: Re-establishing the natural processes and flow into the Barataria Basin would create a productive and sustainable basin by restoring and stabilizing a degrading estuary.
- Storm Surge and Storm Protection: Wetlands in the Barataria Basin that would be created and sustained by the project would help to push back storm surge and reduce wave impacts in portions of Jefferson, Orleans, and Plaquemines Parishes.
- Economic Benefits: The Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion is expected to create a significant regional economic boom for Plaquemines Parish and beyond, including billions in sales revenues, as well as millions in increased annual income and local government revenue. The project would also bring hundreds to thousands of new jobs in the construction industry, as well as increased revenue to local vendors and suppliers.”

However, the project is not without drawbacks. Several communities located south of the proposed diversions that are outside levee protection may experience increased water levels as a result of this project. The CPRA has worked with communities to propose several mitigation measures to raise roads,

docks, and piers, fund floating gardens, compensate landowners for increased water values, offer voluntary buyouts, and improve sewer and septic systems. Additionally, several fisheries are expected to experience losses as a result of the diversion, and the CPRA has established a mitigation plan to minimize or offset these losses as well. Finally, 2000 dolphins that live in the basin are expected to experience stress and reduced survival as a result of decreased salinity members. The CRPA has received a waiver under the MMPA, and will monitor effects of dolphins and fund efforts to reduce stressors and impacts to dolphins.

Your Task

Your small group has been tasked with choosing a group of no more than eight stakeholders to participate in a focus group to discuss this proposed sediment diversion project. This stakeholder focus group will discuss comments received on a draft environmental impact statement and discuss modifications to the proposed plan, along with considering additional alternatives and mitigation measures. You have a large number of individuals who have been proposed to participate in this project, but unfortunately you can only select eight. As a group, decide which eight stakeholders you believe are best suited for the focus group. You will then tell the CPRA (the rest of the class) why you made these selections. (NOTE: There is not right or wrong answer!)

Potential Stakeholders

Allie Gater: A resident of Ironton, a low-income town that is expected to have disproportionately high levels of water inundation because of the diversion. Gater lives outside the levees, and her home was flooded after Hurricane Katrina despite being on stilts. Despite the fact that her specific community is at risk from the diversions, she believes it will benefit the parish as a whole and has become one of the most vocal supporters of the Coastal Master Plan and its proposed diversions. She has publicly stated: "I see the end of Plaquemines Parish coming without utilizing the river and building the diversions. I want people to come back to Plaquemines. I don't want this place to be empty." While she was once a leader in her local community, her controversial views on the diversions have caused conflicts with many neighbors.

Chris Anthemum: Another resident of Ironton, Anthemum runs a family shrimping business in an area where shrimp populations are predicted to diminish. At a public meeting in June 2021, she stated: "When we are sitting here with a dead fishery and have a bunch of bills to pay, how are you going to mitigate those damages?" Anthemum's family has been in the shrimping business for generations, and to them, shrimping is essential to their identity. She and Gater do not see eye to eye.

Ray O'Sun: The owner of a large commercial fishing operation that holds licenses in multiple fisheries and has numerous fleets. O'Sun's company fishes a number of species that are expected to benefit from the proposed diversions and the increase in estuary habitat, but the company also fishes for species that are expected to be negatively impacted. O'Sun also owns shrimping fleets, but he has the capacity to move those fleets to more remote waters that are not expected to be directly impacted by the diversions. O'Sun has indicated an interest in buying vessels from smaller shrimping operations in the area.

Hugo First: A respected member of the Atakapa-Ishak/Chawasha community of Indigenous fisher people, who live in homes only reachable by boat. His community evacuates to safe wetland spaces

together during hurricanes. First has stated “with degradation of the wetlands it is getting harder and harder to find those safe places.” Due to a history of oversights by the government and colonization, he is skeptical about the project, which he expects will further inundate his community. “There have been so many atrocities and so many injustices, not just against us but all Indigenous populations, and we are never considered to be part of the culture, we’re always considered to be subservient.”

Norma Lee Absent: An elected local official in Plaquemine Parish, who is generally willing to go supportive of whatever the CRPA proposes. She is popular among her constituents and can be very persuasive about proposed local projects, but she is extremely unpopular among neighboring communities. After hurricane Ida, she sheepishly admitted that she forgot that the neighboring Atakapa-Ishak/Chawasha community existed.

Rev. Evan Elpus: Pastor of a local Baptist church in Brathwaite, a once thriving community of Black oysterman that has dwindled since the river itself cut through the levee ten years ago, flooding a rich oyster area with freshwater. Elpus has stated he feels like with the proposed diversions, his community is a sacrificial lamb. He is a tremendously respected leader in the Braithwaite community.

Barra Cuda: One of the few Black oystermen remaining in Brathwaite, Cuda has been financially struggling since the decimation of the oyster industry, but has not been able to afford to relocate. He been heard expressing concerns about the lack of other economic opportunities in Brathwaite. While he has some skepticism of the CPRA project, he is curious about the mitigation measures, including the potential buyouts and financial assistance. Most of his friends and family have left the community in the past ten years, and he now largely keeps to himself.

Lieutenant General Major M. Major: A retired commanding general of the U.S. First Army who famously helped restore order and dignity to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and now leads a grassroots environmental movement called the Green Army. A well-respected leader throughout the community, he is highly skeptical of the CPRA and the Master plan due to the role of the oil and gas industry in the decision-making process. “Say you want to control drugs. Do you invite the cartel to be on the planning board? Only in Louisiana,” he has said of the proposed project.

Drill B.B. Drill: An executive at BP, Drill was involved in stakeholder meetings on a previous CPRA project that worked to save 800 acres of beach and dune habitat on Caminada Headland, which protects an important oil port for the offshore oil industry. Drill has not been active in the proposed sediment diversion project, and his views on the project are unknown. However, it is believed that his support of the project could lead to lobbying for more financial support from the federal government, in addition to more money from the oil settlement.

Paige Turner: The community science director for Healthy Gulf, a climate change advocacy group. Her grandfather once drilled for oil in the wetlands, but she is now an environmental activist. She has mixed feelings about the project. She notes that it has not reckoned with the needs for racial and indigenous justice, and she is concerned about the role of oil and gas in the project. She has stated, however, “it is really much too simple to say the coastal restoration program is in service of the oil industry and that’s the only point. In Louisiana we have a lot of people who feel like the United States doesn’t care about us, so we have a lot of people who think that the only way the United States will support our coastal restoration project is if we can justify it by saying that it protects the oil and gas that flows through here. So, I think a lot of people in Louisiana see that loyalty to the oil industry pays off in D.C.”

Marueen B.O. Logist: A marine mammologist, Logist has dedicated her career to studying the dolphins in the basin. She has been very vocal in her concerns that the diversions will be harmful to dolphin populations. Her work is respected, but she often butts heads with policymakers and has been described as “difficult to work with.”

Rita Book: Like Logist, Book has extensively studied the dolphins in the basin. However, she has been a part of the team that has worked with the CPRA in developing the environmental impact statement, and she is expected to lead the charge for continued monitoring of the dolphin populations and their response to the decreased salinity after the implementation of the diversions.

Willie Waites: The owner of a local construction company that is expected to bid on several of the construction projects related to the diversion. Waites is extremely wealthy, and his company has made windfalls from prior hurricane recovery and resilience projects that his company has successfully completed, including projects completed in consultation with the CRPA. However, he has also donated a great deal to charities involved with hurricane relief efforts, and he is generally respected and admired by his employees, who call him “a great boss.”

Betty Wont: A construction worker who has had difficulty finding consistent work since being laid off during the pandemic. He is excited for the proposed diversion project, which he hopes will help him finally get back to steady employment.

References:

<https://midbasin.coastal.la.gov/faqs>

https://cdn2.assets-servd.host/heavy-galah/production/Community_Flyer.pdf

https://cdn2.assets-servd.host/heavy-galah/production/Fisheries_Flyer.pdf

<https://cdn2.assets-servd.host/heavy-galah/production/LorenScottDiversionEconomicReport.pdf>

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<https://midbasin.coastal.la.gov/faqs>

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/no-state-is-losing-land-like-louisiana-but-no-other-state-has-a-bolder-plan>

* The word “stakeholder” is fraught and does not reflect many knowledge systems. We will use this word for this exercise because it is still used in most formal US environmental management. We will discuss this further in class.

Credit: This activity was inspired by an in-class activity taught by Dr. Grant Murray. That activity involved a different environmental problem, and this has been adapted for the Gulf Coast context.