



Written by [Kelly Holt](#) on October 22, 2010

Louisiana Builds Berm “Islands” to Trap Oil

Since June, the Bayou State has constructed a series of low-lying sand berms by dredging sand from the Gulf of Mexico. The attempt to block and capture oil from this summer’s oil spill, caused by a blowout at BP’s Deepwater Horizon well, is under scrutiny for its effectiveness.



According to the Oct. 21 [New York Times](#), federal officials and scientists argue that it’s a pointless effort, the oil having become too dispersed to be captured by the berms. So far the project has captured only 1000 of the five million barrels believed to have escaped from the well.

BP Managing Director Bob Dudley joined Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal at a [press conference](#) July 7 to commit “\$360 million to construct six sand berms seaward of the Louisiana barrier islands, and promised that BP would fund the project through to completion.”

So far, the company has disbursed \$240 million to the state.

The NYT’s article quoted Texas A&M University’s Larry McKinney, who heads the Gulf of Mexico research center at Corpus Christi, Texas. “It certainly would have no impact on the diluted oil, which is what we’re talking about now. The probability of their being effective right now is pretty low.”

Hundreds of thousands of barrels of oil were captured at the wellhead by BP, burned off by Coast Guard vessels, or recovered by skimming operations.

Some refer to the project as Jindal’s folly, since the amount of oil recovered so far doesn’t justify the money spent for the effort, but politicians suggest that abandoning the project before completion would jeopardize the public perception that Governor Jindal handled the spill in a positive way.

On May 27, *Navy Times* reported Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen [approved](#) Louisiana’s plan to ring its coastline with a network of six-foot tall sand berms. One location for the berms is along the Chandeleur Islands in the Gulf of Mexico and the other is a string of barrier islands west of the Mississippi River at the river’s delta. But according to the NYT, the Coast Guard has had little or no oversight or involvement in the countermeasure since then.

At the time of Adm. Allen’s approval, the Army Corps of Engineers objected to the plan, claiming it would alter tidal movement, but has since given permission to the state to proceed. The Corps regulates offshore engineering projects but has little oil-spill expertise.

The berm project has boosted Louisiana’s industry. But the Shaw Group, lead project contractor, based in Baton Rouge, has been one of Jindal’s leading campaign contributors.

Some environmental groups are again complaining, however, that the project isn’t just ineffective, but that it threatens wildlife, and that the resources could be better used for future coastal restoration.

Louisiana’s coastline has been severely damaged by previous dredging projects, and natural barrier



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islands are disappearing since the Mississippi River was originally diverted and channeled by levees. The islands are starved of land-building silt deposited with each yearly flood. Conservationists argue that the disappearing islands could be bolstered by dredged sand, just as natural processes would have done.

The berm plan originally called for 40 miles of berm, but has been altered to only 22 miles in order to stay within the \$360 million budget. The reduction would ease concerns that the berms were too close together, impeding natural tides, and interior bays, harming existing fisheries.

Now that the well is capped, recovery has proceeded much more quickly than expected as natural processes have been allowed to work. Officials question whether the money would be better spent elsewhere.

“Circumstances have changed considerably,” said Thomas L. Strickland, assistant interior secretary for fish and wildlife and parks. “And that would seem to warrant a revisiting of whether or not a continuation of the berm-building is the best use of limited resources, when we’re looking at such substantial restoration needs that exist in the gulf.”

Beleaguered Louisiana, known for corrupt politics since before the days of the Long brothers, seems poised for another battle in the aftermath of the oil spill.

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