Churches join move to save La. wetlands

By BOB ANDERSON
Environmental editor

As water gets closer and closer to some coastal communities, their positions become untenable unless wetland restoration action is taken, says Rob Gorman of Catholic Social Services.

"There are going to have to be massive relocations, if we do nothing," says Gorman, who also is chairman of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, which represents 60 concerned organizations.

Gorman realizes all of coastal Louisiana can't be saved. The natural forces involved and the money needed are both too great.

"There are going to be very difficult, very painful decisions" about what to save and what to let go, he says. "What is more difficult and painful is that we haven't made any decision, so we're losing all of it."

Gorman is one of many religious leaders who has gotten involved, seeing the issues as ones of morality and social justice as well as economics.

Human dignity, quality of life and the death of a culture are among Gorman's concerns.

Many people in coastal Louisiana who've followed their forefathers into the fishing industry have developed a wealth of knowledge and expertise and have helped to provide an important economic base for the state. But their knowledge, skills and professions are threatened by the loss of coastal wetlands, which provide a nursery ground for the fish and shrimp they catch.

"By human actions we've caused these losses, and by human actions we have to rectify them," Gorman says. It's an issue of justice.

The involvement of a number of churches in the issue, through the Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Interfaith Stewardship Plan, has broadened the issue from just an environmental one.

With the communities and the jobs will go a "unique culture," involving Cajuns and Houma Indians, who also speak French.

"Listen to the people talk in French," Gorman says. "A lot of the words refer to things that are found in the wetlands. Their language is rich in its references to the animals and plants of the marsh. Their stories are stories of things that have happened in the wetlands."

Gorman says his in-laws all live in Chauvin and Little Caillou.

"This is where their ancestors were," he says. "The culture is tied to the area."

Some of the communities he sees as being in the worst trouble are Isle de Jean-Charles, a peninsula in Terrebonne Parish, Gibson, Dulac and Leeville.

Land loss is not just affecting small coastal communities, he says, but will threaten inland cities like Houma and Thibodaux, especially when hurricanes strike without the barrier islands and coastal marsh to buffer the winds and storm surges.

Gorman lives near Thibodaux and found his subdivision flooded during a relatively mild hurricane. As the Gulf comes closer, "there's less drainage for us," he says. "Even if the land is stable, what good is it if you have a couple of inches of water in your house with every storm?"

Decisions are going to have to be made, maybe not to abandon specific communities, but to help others where the impact of the work will be the greatest, Gorman says. For the unprotected communities, the Gulf will eventually force people out and that will be painful.

"But if we do nothing," Gorman says, "then everybody is going to have to move north of Highway 90."
