"They drove a stake through its heart"

Proposals to fill in La. canals not gaining much traction

At the heart of a lawsuit against a number of oil and gas companies filed by the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority — East levee board is the question of how much damage was caused by dredging canals through Louisiana's coastal wetlands.

But landowners have long opposed one approach to minimizing the damage: backfilling the canals. "The people who have these canals don't necessarily want these canals backfilled," said Don Briggs, the Louisiana Oil and Gas Association's president. "Some of the best spots to fish are in areas like that."

Even as early as the 1950s, researchers had concerns about the canals, not only because of the marsh that was disturbed but also because of the spoil banks piled up along each side of the waterways. These small levees of dirt, dug from the canal channels, can impound water in certain areas while the canals let in saltwater and otherwise alter the way the landscape functions.

These indirect effects from the dredging of oil and gas canals compound the direct impact of the canal construction and are considered one of the multiple causes of coastal wetland loss in the state.

State officials, saying these were sins of the past, say the state has changed the way it allows canals to be dredged in the marsh as well as how companies have to "mitigate" or replace the marsh they damage or impact.

In addition, oil and gas canals aren't needed as often now, thanks to directional drilling technology, Briggs said, and if a canal is needed, industry is required to mitigate any damage. "If I use 1 acre of land over here, I'll mitigate 5 acres somewhere else," Briggs said.

He also said many landowners consider the canals and the spoil banks as a benefit for flood and storm-surge protection as well as...
Associated Press file photo/US Army Corps of Engineers

A long, straight man-made canal, center, runs through marsh near the mouth of the Mississippi River in Louisiana in this 2003 aerial photo. Next to the man-made canal, a natural bayou snakes its way through the wetlands. While natural bayous are open to the public, the Louisiana Supreme Court has ruled that man-made canals can be closed. Access to these canals is now a hotly debated topic in Louisiana.

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DAVID MUTH, state director of the National Wildlife Federation's Louisiana Coastal Campaign

The mandate that backfilling canals in areas that are destined to fill in during the course of other restoration projects could be in the way. "There's no reason you can't fill in the canals within that footprint," Muth said.

Kyle Graham, deputy executive director of the state's Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, said canals do get filled in during the course of other restoration projects. In addition, the state is looking at how to evaluate and prioritize areas where backfilling or other stabilization measures could buy some time until larger restoration projects are put in place. He said although details still need to be worked out, that effort could involve offering incentives to landowners or expanding current programs that fund smaller projects, some of which could include the closing of in-canals.

Associated Press file photo/US Army Corps of Engineers

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