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Coastal protection managers meet in La.'s 1st "levee school"

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The Associated Press

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — Louisiana's front line hurricane protection managers, who work for local levee boards and districts, are getting their first-ever organized crash course in Louisiana's flood protection and coastal restoration efforts, dubbed "Louisiana Levee School."

The three-day professional training program began Tuesday. It was designed to help assist the levee board appointees understand their responsibilities, the flood control and protection work ongoing across state agencies and the state's master plan for coastal protection, said officials who organized the event.

"Is there going to be a test? I submit, when you go home, there'll be a test every day," said Bruce Thompson, a businessman with the Flood Protection Alliance, an advocacy group that represents a number of New Orleans businesses and civic organizations.

Louisiana has lost 1,900 square miles of land to coastal erosion since the Mississippi River levees were built in the 1930s and began starving the marshland of its natural rebuilding process, said Sidney Coffee, the governor's executive assistant for coastal activities. Another 500 square miles are projected to be lost in the next 50 years, threatening the nation's oil and gas supply, seafood supply and ecosystem.

But the state's coastal protection and restoration efforts were a mishmash of state and local agencies, mainly uncoordinated, with levee board appointments the stuff of political patronage rather than experience — until hurricanes Katrina and Rita flooded and leveled large swaths of south Louisiana in 2005.

The hurricanes turned 217 square miles of Louisiana's marsh into open water, Coffee said.

"Our situation has always been an urgent one, not always dealt with as an urgent one," Coffee told levee school participants.

After the back-to-back storm devastation shone a spotlight on the state's uncoordinated flood protection efforts, state lawmakers — pushed by Gov. Kathleen Blanco — merged south Louisiana's levee districts, restricted their activities and changed the board appointments to require expertise in engineering and hydrology.

Blanco and lawmakers also set up a state Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority to coordinate and oversee Louisiana's hurricane protection efforts.

Then, Thompson and another businessman with the Flood Protection Alliance suggested a truly integrated approach to flood management and protection efforts would need to bring levee board appointees closer to the state's decision-makers in those efforts, said John Pine, director of LSU's Disaster Science and Management Program.

During levee school, the three dozen participants are hearing from university experts, state officials working on coastal restoration planning efforts, disaster management experts and others. Topics include flood protection administration, levee board legal issues, the evolution of levee districts, the types and designs of flood protection systems and climate risks.

Louisiana's protection and restoration efforts are guided by a \$55 billion statewide master plan that will take 30 to 40 years to complete with a mix of state and federal dollars, though not all the financing is secure. Coffee said the state has at least enough money to cover projects for the next three to four years.

The levee school program is hosted by the LSU AgCenter, Louisiana Sea Grant, the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources and the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development. Officials said they plan to hold an annual levee school program with continuing education classes.

On the Net:

<http://www.laseagrant.org/leveeschool>