

Louisiana Oil Industry

Humans manipulated the Louisiana coastal marsh through the development of an efficient and economical water transportation network. Within Lafourche Parish, canals were dredged and dug by hand to connect area lakes with Bayou Lafourche. Foret's canal, above Raceland, leads to Lake Bouef. The Company Canal extends from Lake Salvador on the east bank of Bayou Lafourche through Lockport to the Intracoastal Waterway south of Lockport. The Intracoastal Waterway was dredged connecting existing canals, bayous, and lakes from Texas to Florida. In the South Lafourche area, the Clovelly Canal led from Little Lake to Bayou Lafourche, as did the Breton Canal (See Figure 8).

The rise of oil prices from \$.81 per barrel in 1907 to over \$30.00 a barrel in 1985 led to a broad search for oil and gas throughout Louisiana's coastal marshes (See the CD 100 years of Oil & Gas and Black Gold Beneath the Bayous; can be downloaded free at www.osradp.lsu.edu/). Heavy drilling and production equipment could not be moved through the soft marsh, so location canals were dredged. Throughout the 1930s, some 45–90 percent of wetlands loss was due to canal dredging. In 1926, south Louisiana produced 4,162,817 barrels of oil, or one-sixth of the entire state's output. The Leeville and Golden Meadow fields were two of the most active fields in south Louisiana. The Bay Marchand field, just offshore of Fourchon, was among the first large scale offshore oil fields. Its output led to the success of Chevron Oil Company.

In the Louisiana of the 1930's any industry to help the impoverished state was welcomed. The state had few paved roads, a poor school system, and little electric power in the rural areas. The state government was ready to wed any industry, which provided jobs and money. The oil industry was the welcomed savior to the government. But the local inhabitants of the oil producing areas of South Lafourche did not share that view of the incoming foreigners and their industry. It was a cultural conflict of poor, hardworking, Cajun fisherman and their families colliding with the well-paid, hardworking, American roughnecks.

The oil industry had developed land-based methods and operations in Oklahoma and Texas. But in Louisiana, much of the oil was under water. The state and national government received revenues of hundreds of millions of dollars, some of which began modernizing rural Louisiana. The government encouraged and assisted offshore oil development with little or no restraints toward the local populations or the environment. Outside of the obvious localized oil pollution, no one understood the significant environmental problems being created.





picture by: N.N. Rabalais

Figure 8. Canals, Areas of Dredging and Waterways

The Leeville and Golden Meadow areas were crisscrossed with location canals (See www.wetmaap.org – download map and pictures.). The immediate environmental destruction was of little perceived cost compared to the local jobs and state funds generated. Even a well blow-out in Golden Meadow which contaminated the drinking water and forced evacuation of the town for weeks did not slow or interfere with oil exploration in the wetlands.

The state of Louisiana and its population were happy to allow the oil industry to work unbridled as long as the revenues to the state continued to subsidize progress. The population accepted the environmental and cultural problems because oil kept taxes down and provided money, roads, and other community improvements.

The damages done to the environment by the oil industry and canal digging had become apparent only after the environmental movement of the late 1960's created awareness. Before that time, people accepted environmental loss as only a minor problem. It also became evident from biological research in the 1950's, 1960's, and

1970's that the wetlands were not wastelands, but some of the most biologically productive areas on earth.

Humans have contributed to the acceleration of coastal land loss in a variety of ways. What does this loss of land mean to Louisiana and its people? It means a loss of jobs, millions of dollars in lost income, and a decline of an aesthetically pleasing area of the state. This progressive loss is a menace to the state's million-dollar seafood, fur, and alligator resources. It represents a reduction of the nation's most valuable winter habitat for waterfowl and migrating bird life (see BTNEP [Migratory Bird Poster](#)). Louisiana's coastal wetlands provide habitat for over 5 million migratory waterfowl (LDWF 2002). Loss of revenues from offshore mineral activities is occurring. It was estimated that for every mile Louisiana's shoreline moved inward, the state lost \$35 - \$40 million in oil and gas revenues, before the state's boundaries were set. Sport fishing along the coast for saltwater species could be altered drastically due to loss of essential nursery areas. The coastal marsh and barrier islands act as a buffer against the tidal surge pushed ashore by hurricanes and storms. In short, the very livelihood of Louisiana and its rich customs and traditions are at stake. The generations of the past and future must be careful not only to correct the mistakes of the past but also not to compound them by ineffective means.

We have established that Louisiana's natural resources are rich, and vital to our state's people and economy. We have seen that we have acted carelessly in the use of these resources. We can also see that our responsibility as citizens of this state call for us to take the leadership in finding a solution to these problems. The following graphic organizer shows the functions of the Wetlands.

