

# THE BIG BUY

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It's official; relocating coastal property is more cost-effective than trying to protect that property by building artificial beaches.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers last month released its proposed projects for the Mississippi Coastal Improvements Program, known by its acronym, MsCIP. The MsCIP was initiated after Hurricane Katrina to "reduce the vulnerability of the region."

There are portions of this plan that I disagree with, but those disagreements are overshadowed by the fact that the Corps of Engineers is finally proposing to buy out coastal properties and relocate public infrastructure.

To my knowledge, this is the first time that the agency has included a serious proposal for relocating property away from significant coastal hazards, rather than simply attempting to protect with expensive coastal engineering like sea walls or massive beach nourishment.

The cost-and-benefit summary in the MsCIP speaks volumes. A proposal to "restore" the undeveloped barrier islands of the Gulf Islands National Seashore would cost an estimated \$477 million. The benefits to the mainland shoreline are estimated at only \$17.6 million a year in possible storm damage reduction.

So, we would spend almost half a billion in federal tax dollars, and we would break even after 30 years (if the restoration were a success).

From a scientific perspective, I am dubious about the storm-surge reduction benefits of the restoration, and I am also philosophically opposed to the use of a national park as an engineered storm buffer.

In the same document, we are presented with a far more enlightened proposed project, termed the High Hazard Area Risk Reduction Program. The centerpiece of this project would be the purchase of approximately 2,000 properties located in the most vulnerable locations.

The costs of this project are much smaller, at an estimated \$187 million to \$397 million, while the benefits are significantly larger, at \$22 million to \$33 million per year.

This plan could pay for itself in less than six years. Even better, the benefits are guaranteed and long-lasting.

The barrier island restoration project simply cannot guarantee protection and does nothing to get anyone out of harm's way.

This is a giant step in the right direction for sensible coastal management, for fiscal responsibility and for environmental protection. I hope that the residents of Mississippi (in fact, all the citizens of Mississippi) will embrace this voluntary buy-out and relocation proposal.

Relocation of property and infrastructure away from eroding shorelines and high-hazard areas should become the Corps of Engineers' official policy. Relocation of property is a viable (if not popular) alternative to the building of seawalls and beach renourishment, especially in communities with a low density of development.

Holding the line against coastal erosion will become increasingly difficult and costly as sea-level rise accelerates.

Granted, there is understandable concern within local coastal communities regarding the loss of tax base if beach-front homes are moved or if the lots are lost. Yet few, if any, studies have been conducted examining the potential benefits of relocating critical infrastructure away from an eroding shoreline. The benefits may outweigh the losses in many cases.

These benefits can include: substantial savings for taxpayers, preservation of the recreational beach (the main economic resource for many tourist towns), an increase in the value of remaining properties, reduced future risk from storm damage, and a lighter load for emergency managers.

The benefits are rarely considered by local communities in planning for their future.

Beach nourishment — the currently preferred method of fighting coastal erosion — is becoming increasingly expensive. In the future, beaches will need more sand, more frequently.

The sand resources are simply not available to fight this battle into the 22nd century. In light of this, relocation may begin to seem like a more reasonable option.

The Corps of Engineers is to be congratulated for pursuing a policy that may not be popular with the Mississippi congressional delegation, but one that should be embraced by the majority of concerned American taxpayers.

Both fiscal conservatives and environmentalists alike should applaud this plan. It will save billions in tax dollars over the years. It will protect the coastal environment.

And it just might save lives as well. Indeed, it is the only viable long-term solution for the flood-prone coast of Mississippi.

I only wish that the corps would take the same approach in places like Alabama's Dauphin Island, an area even more vulnerable with less likelihood for successful protection.