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Louisiana Permits Coal Terminal Adjacent To \$300M Wetlands Restoration Project

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On Friday, President Obama is set to deliver a speech in New Orleans on the need to “grow the economy and create jobs by increasing our exports.” And despite issuing an executive order earlier this month to help communities prepare for climate change, Obama is not expected to address the fact that another coal export terminal is on track to be built in the fragile region.

The Mississippi River delta is one of the world’s most complex and rich landscape of

wetlands, but decades of increasing industrialization have caused the coastal region to experience massive loss of land in the bayou. Now efforts to try to restore some land through a critical coastal restoration project are up against a coal export terminal with one permit in its pocket and two to go.

On October 1, the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources issued a coastal use permit for RAM Terminals, LLC to build a coal export terminal on the lower Mississippi River in Plaquemines Parish, the same property as a \$300 million coastal restoration project expected to build up to about 50 square miles of land over the next half century. This restoration project is part of Louisiana's 2012 Coastal Master Plan aimed to create more resilient communities and a sustainable coast — although the threat of another coal terminal, which can add heavy metals and toxins to the wetlands from runoff, does not seem compatible with the Master Plan.

The issuance of this permit has led a group of environmental advocates and local residents in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana to file a lawsuit against the state Department of Natural Resources. The lawsuit charges that the DNR “did not consider potential alternative sites, or fully weigh the considerable, adverse environmental impacts of the project against its questionable economic benefits.”

DNR stated that the economics for issuing the permit outweighed the environmental costs. RAM estimates that the building of the terminal will create hundreds of construction jobs and up to 150 permanent positions. However some, such as Ironton resident Rose Jackson, fear RAM will bring in outside employees for most of the jobs, therefore providing little economic value to the small communities in Plaquemines Parish.

In recent years, state, local, and federal officials have begun to recognize the wetlands' contributions to the region, leading to numerous coastal restoration projects, such as the effort in Plaquemines Parish to provide needed sediment to the wetlands and marshes of Barataria Bay. These natural coastal barriers serve as front line protection to local communities from hurricanes and sea level rise and provide critical habitat for important species of fish, reptiles, and marine mammals.

Just a few months ago, advocates in Plaquemines Parish thought DNR would reject the permit application for another coal export terminal. However, on July 31, the state Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, which oversees the state's coastal restoration efforts, reached an agreement with RAM Terminals regarding the operation of the facility, thus allowing DNR to issue a permit. The agreement set limits on the facility

that would require it to stop operations during “Peak Operating Period” or when the Mississippi River is flowing at 600,000 cubic feet per second or more and carrying large amounts of sediment that will help rebuild the wetlands. The Gulf Restoration Network expressed concerns about the agreement, indicating that “hydrological studies of the diversion have not yet been completed, and more operational flexibility may be needed.”

Potential negative effects of the siting are not limited to sedimentation concerns. During Hurricane Isaac in 2012, the RAM property was flooded and exposed heaps of coal from nearby Kinder Morgan facilities were displaced into the nearby wetlands. After the incident, deputy director of the Gulf Restoration Network Aaron Viles commented on the proposed RAM Terminal calling location of the facility adjacent to a restoration project “a horrible idea.”

Protests over building new coal export facilities are not unique to Louisiana. In the Pacific Northwest, opponents are turning out by the thousands and major money is being spent in campaigns to deter proposals to build coal export terminals shipping to China and Asian markets. And in the Gulf of Mexico another plan was scrapped earlier this year when New Elk Coal Company paid a one-time fee to cancel their lease.

The October permit approval means the RAM coal terminal has moved one step closer to construction, but it still needs a water quality permit from the state Department of Environmental Quality and a 404c “dredge and fill” permit from the Army Corps of Engineers before construction can proceed. The Army Corps decision in particular is lining up to be one of the first tests for a new federal mandate.

On November 1, President Obama signed an executive order directing federal agencies to coordinate on actions “necessary to make the Nation’s watersheds, natural resources, and ecosystems, and the communities and economies that depend on them, more resilient in the face of a changing climate.” The Army Corps will need to consider whether the proposed coal facility’s impact on the coastal restoration project and local air and water quality is consistent with the goal of making our communities more resilient to the impacts of climate change.

Local residents and the environment have already been subject to a litany of adverse impacts from the existing coal terminals in the area. The list of issues ranges from health complications, such as asthma and respiratory problems, to flooding to degraded ecosystems. “When you pollute the air and water in a community, you degrade the quality of life of the people living in it,” says Bryan Ernst a local resident of Plaquemines Parish, “families in this area are committed to their communities. We love this place for

its nature, for the fishing and wetlands. But the coal dust pollution is making our home unlivable. The last thing we want is another coal terminal moving in.”

Kristan Uhlenbrock is the Associate Director for Ocean Communications at the Center for American Progress.

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