



Brownfields Briefs

Gulf Coast Reconstruction

The Biggest “Brownfield”

by Lenny Siegel
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The recovery of Gulf Coast areas devastated by hurricanes Katrina and Rita, in the late summer of 2005, will be the largest reconstruction project in U.S. history. Evidence thus far shows that many impacted areas, particularly in New Orleans, are contaminated. Pollutants include industrial chemicals, petroleum and other hazardous substances from cars and other common products, and biological wastes. Thus, the Louisiana-Mississippi Gulf Coast has become the nation’s largest “Brownfield.”

Revitalizing these areas raises many of the same issues that have arisen at smaller Brownfield sites across the country.

- Health Risk and Public Involvement
- Redevelopment and Gentrification
- Worker Training and Local Hiring
- Debris Removal

Fortunately, if those in positions of authority take the time to learn from the national Brownfields experience, they can take steps to ensure that the recovery benefits the entire population of the region. In a sense, Brownfields programs have been a trial run for the enormous Gulf Coast effort.

In this paper, I am not going to offer specific recovery plans or objectives. That’s not my role as an outsider. Rather, my goal is to offer some general observations in the hope that they will help empower environmental and social justice organizations as well as the populations that they serve.

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We don't have all the data yet, but it appears that some districts of New Orleans and the rural Gulf Coast escaped the worst of the damage. That is, many trees came down and utilities and services were disrupted, but they were not flooded with a soup of toxic and biological wastes. Furthermore, many contaminated areas were primarily residential. Since many definitions of Brownfields address only industrial properties with real or perceived toxic contamination, these areas don't necessarily qualify for regulation or funding under Brownfields programs.

It doesn't matter. The rebirth of New Orleans and other Gulf Coast communities requires universal attention to the environmental hazards unleashed by the hurricanes. Just as conventional Brownfields are best addressed through neighborhood-wide and community-wide strategies, Gulf Coast recovery requires a regional view. The reconstruction of housing, infrastructure, schools, and places of employment requires safe places for workers to live. To make it possible for most of the displaced people to return to the region, they need sources of income.

Health Risk and Public Involvement

By October, U.S. EPA's response to Katrina and Rita was in full gear. The agency is systematically sampling water, testing air, and checking on Superfund sites, sewage treatment facilities, and other properties of environmental concern. It has prepared fliers and public service announcements, but the community involvement effort remains immature. It's time for environmental agencies to hold community meetings, set up advisory boards, and organize electronic bulletin boards to invite feedback.

The people who live or lived in these communities deserve to understand what is going on. They need to understand the numbers that suggest that their homes, workplaces, or neighborhoods are hazardous or safe. They may have knowledge about the local environment that experts from across the country could use. And they probably have valuable perspectives about cleanup strategies and priorities. This is the role that members of affected communities play everywhere government agencies take the time to give them a “seat at the table” at Brownfields, Superfund sites, or federal facilities. And it's the best way to assure that programs address their needs.

To be sure, some Gulf Coast residents are doing their best just to survive, and others have left the area permanently. But many others appear to be in a holding pattern—figuratively treading water until they can return to their homes or jobs. Plenty of people are willing and able to participate in the environmental recovery of their communities. For example, in mid-October 1600 displaced residents organized the ACORN Katrina Survivor Association “to demand more effective relief efforts and a voice in the rebuilding process.”

With vast numbers of people still far from home, it may take more than posting signs on telephone poles and store windows or placing ads in local newspapers to engage the public. Officials may need to take the show on the road to centers where evacuees are still concentrated. They need to work with organizations, such as ACORN, that are already creating forums for displaced residents. For many years, the Gulf Coast has had a vibrant environmental justice community. Those people are around, trying to be heard, if only officials would take time to listen.

There is ample evidence that EPA and state regulatory agencies do their jobs best when the public is involved, early and often, and along the Gulf Coast momentous environmental decisions are being made now. It is time to open up the process?

Redevelopment and Gentrification

Soon government officials will be making far-reaching decisions about what to rebuild and where. Some of those decisions are already being made now. Those decisions are too important to be made solely by people who were elected or appointed before the storms, or by representatives of the federal government. The people who lived and worked on the Gulf Coast before Katrina and Rita have a right to be heard.

Otherwise, redevelopment could mean the wholesale, permanent displacement of tens of thousands of disempowered residents, against their will. Already, the *Washington Post* (October 19, 2005) reports that more people are able to move back into predominantly white, affluent areas that were flooded than those who can return to poor, overwhelmingly black Ghettos. This not only has direct impacts; it could permanently shift the political landscape and further disempower lower-income, non-white residents.

I don't pretend to have a regional redevelopment plan. In fact, I have no portfolio to propose one. Decision-makers will have to balance public safety—particularly in the expectation of future killer storms—historic preservation, neighborhood cohesion, and economic survival in deciding which neighborhoods to rebuild. Whether or not they recognize the “right of return” demanded by community activists, they will need to build or find homes for people who wish to return. They will also have the opportunity to locate toxic factories away from homes and other sensitive uses.

In a sense, New Orleans and many other Gulf Coast areas present clean slates. Communities can be re-organized, not just rebuilt. But officials will be tempted to exclude the poorest, “least productive” segments of the population, making the area appear cleaner, providing safer environs for tourists, and reducing the continuing demand for social services. This could mean gentrification on a scale unimagined elsewhere.

To be sure, many displaced people have no reason or desire to return to New Orleans or other devastated communities, but low-income and institutionalized residents have as much right to go home as anyone else. Government policy should clearly endorse the “right of return,” and the displaced people themselves should play a role in deciding what that means.

Worker Training and Local Hiring

In the weeks after the storms, there have been numerous news stories charging that Gulf Coast businesses and workers have been overlooked in initial recovery efforts. Instead, outside workers are being brought in, often under unsafe, exploitative conditions. Some holders of large government contractors have pledged to offer subcontracts and jobs to people from the area, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency has responded by promising to re-open its original contracts, but progress has been painfully slow.

There will be a lot of work, for some time, cleaning up debris and both chemical and biological contamination in New Orleans and smaller communities in Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, and Alabama. There will also be a great deal of work in both demolition and construction, in conditions where workers will require environmental training as well as protective gear.

Fortunately, the federal government has a good deal of positive experience in this area. Both the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) and the Environmental Protection Agency support training programs, some of which are already in place in the region, that combine construction training with hazardous waste operations,

lead abatement, and asbestos abatement. They provide the support services that are often necessary to bring inexperienced, low-income people into the construction/environmental workforce. While there is probably a need to update some curricula to address unique, post-storm conditions, these programs could provide the training necessary to get critical work done at minimum risk, in a way that would contribute significantly to the economic recovery of the region.

But these programs have one significant shortcoming. Many of them cannot promise jobs to their trained graduates. Environmental job training programs end up spinning their wheels unless there are legal requirements for contractors with government agencies or other major builders to hire locally, or to hire program graduates. Government-sponsored reconstruction programs must be designed to hire locally, and to ensure that workers inexperienced in the hazardous tasks ahead be properly trained to work efficiently and safely. These programs should be directly linked to agencies, contractors, and unions that can ensure that the trainees are employed, not just for two weeks or three months, but long enough to rebuild their lives, not just someone else’s home or office.

Debris Removal

As hurricane recovery moves from opening roads and restoring vital services, the removal of debris—be it trees, totaled cars, or uninhabitable structures—must be approached in a more systematic, environmentally sensitive way. Cleaning up after Rita and Katrina will create an unprecedentedly enormous debris removal challenge, totaling several hundred million cubic yards of waste, much of which must be considered hazardous until proven otherwise. Open burning all of the waste would pose acute threats to public health and the environment. Burying it all in landfills—many of which would have to be created for this specific purpose—would be environmentally dangerous in the long run.

The time is now to evaluate alternatives that maximize the recovery and recycling of metals and other materials, use combustibles to generate energy, and minimize both residual wastes and hazardous releases. This not only means considering innovative technologies, but also developing scale options that might allow the deployment of numerous, relatively small and transportable units that can be brought to the waste.

The Opportunity

Each recovery objective raises its own technical challenges, but their effective resolution all rest on a fundamental approach. The people who lived and worked on the Gulf Coast need to be plugged into the process. They need to be informed. Their views should be heard.

Today there are many forms of two-way telecommunications that make it possible to involve the affected public. However, to get displaced people—many of whom felt powerless far before the hurricanes hit—to participate in recovery, government agencies at all levels, as well as community, political, business, labor, and faith-based organization must make it clear that they are wanted.

If recovery is based upon such a democratic strategy, the nation’s largest natural tragedy may be transformed into an unprecedented opportunity for collective rebirth.

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