HABITAT RESTORATION

The Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary in Louisiana—the 4.2-million-acre region between the Atchafalaya and Mississippi rivers—is the fastest disappearing landmass on Earth. As estuaries and wetlands in the region rapidly turn to open water, destroying interior vegetative marsh and ridge habitats, coastal communities are increasingly vulnerable to storm surge, deprived of potable drinking water, and face the inevitable exhaustion of resources that supply the nation with shrimp, oysters, fish, oil, and gas, as well as recreational opportunities.

THE NATIONAL ESTUARY PROGRAM IN ACTION

Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program

To recover this prized coastal habitat, the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program (BTNEP) and the Greater Lafourche Port Commission are working cooperatively with other partners on a three-phase effort designed to restore a natural ridge that will provide needed protection to fish, wildlife, and plants.

The main component of the Maritime Forest Ridge and Marsh Restoration Project at Port Fourchon is the harvesting of sediment, directing it through pipelines to build new land, and planting new vegetation—specially selected grass plugs, seeds, and woody plants that will offer critical protection to habitat in the region.

"The Ridge Project" is supported by grants and generous donations of time, expertise, and money from birding clubs, oil companies, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, and other interest groups. When the project is completed, the region will see 2.25 miles of restored ridge and marsh habitat—more than 120 acres of maritime forest ridge, marsh, and tidal creeks.

Although the effects of recent hurricanes have slowed progress, the 60-plus acres of new surface area created during the first phase of the project—before the hurricanes hit—prevented damage to the Port and surrounding land that would have otherwise occurred without the ridge, according to the Greater Lafourche Port Commission—an outcome that verifies the effectiveness of BTNEP's Comprehensive Conservation Management Plan and the value it brings to the country.

The next 40 acres of the project will be shaped with tidal chan-

nels constructed every 1,000 feet along the project site to provide for water exchange between the mitigated marshes to the south and the shallow open water areas to the north. Long-term plans include construction of new footpaths and boardwalks, and observation platforms and bridges along the ridge and out onto the marsh. Kiosks, interpretive signage, and a nature center will complete the effort.

Their experience will be applied to future restoration projects in Louisiana and across the country. The BTNEP is quickly becoming a major resource for habitat restoration information as they field daily inquiries from NEPs across the country, other watershed management groups, and environmentalists worldwide.

Visit **www.btnep.org** to learn more about this and other BTNEP efforts.

EPA's National Estuary Program (NEP) is a unique and successful coastal watershed-based program established in 1987 under the Clean Water Act Amendments. The NEP involves the public and collaborates with partners to protect, restore, and maintain the water quality and ecological integrity of 28 estuaries of national significance located in 18 coastal states and Puerto Rico.

For more information about the NEP go to www.epa.gov/owow/estuaries.