Mississippi River can buy time for Louisiana wetlands, scientists say

Title
River Prescription Could Address Short-Term Emergency and Long-Term Health
Mississippi River water can keep oil away from some of Louisiana's fragile marshes, buying time for critical response efforts, says Audubon (BirdLife Partner in the U.S.) coastal scientist G. Paul Kemp, Ph.D. Water levels are dropping, as happens every June, and the window of opportunity will soon close.

"The time to act is now", concludes an assessment by Kemp and other prominent coastal scientists, who are calling on government officials to change the water-flow management at the Old River Control Structure complex west of Natchez, Miss. "The river is a powerful tool, and it is our ally in this crisis", says Kemp. "Management of water flows between the Mississippi River's two great branches has been on autopilot for decades. That's not good for the coast long term, and it's certainly not good enough now, in the middle of such an unprecedented disaster."

The Mississippi River divides into two branches, the Atchafalaya and the Mississippi, near Natchez, Miss. The flow of water between the two is regulated to 70 percent (Mississippi) and 30 percent (Atchafalaya) by a massive complex called Old River Control. If the 70-30 split stands, the amount of river water reaching the bird's foot delta will continue to decrease, and oil will reach more marshes more quickly, Kemp contends. But by slowly increasing the percentage of flow down the main stem of the Mississippi, the oil can be held offshore longer, giving response crews more time to deal with it before it poses a greater threat to wildlife and sensitive habitat.

"This could have a major influence on how much oil gets to the marshes," the assessment reads. "Scientists know that the freshwater plume of the Mississippi around the Bird's Foot has been limiting oiling of marshes on the west side of Breton Sound and east side of Barataria Bay." Kemp is one of a number of scientists and conservationists calling for a more ecologically informed management of the Mississippi River's deltaic ecosystem, which is heavily degraded by overconsumption and antiquated management practices.

"Long-term recovery for the Gulf Coast region depends on Mississippi River management", says Kemp. "We have an opportunity right now to put the river to work for us, and these principles and lessons must be a part of our long-term response as well. We can't save the

coast without the river. "Any long-term plan for the region's health must include a new approach to river management – one that reconnects the river to its delta – as well as sustainable, science-based efforts to restore barrier islands and marshes."