

“Helping People Help the (Marsh) Land”

by Audrina Lange



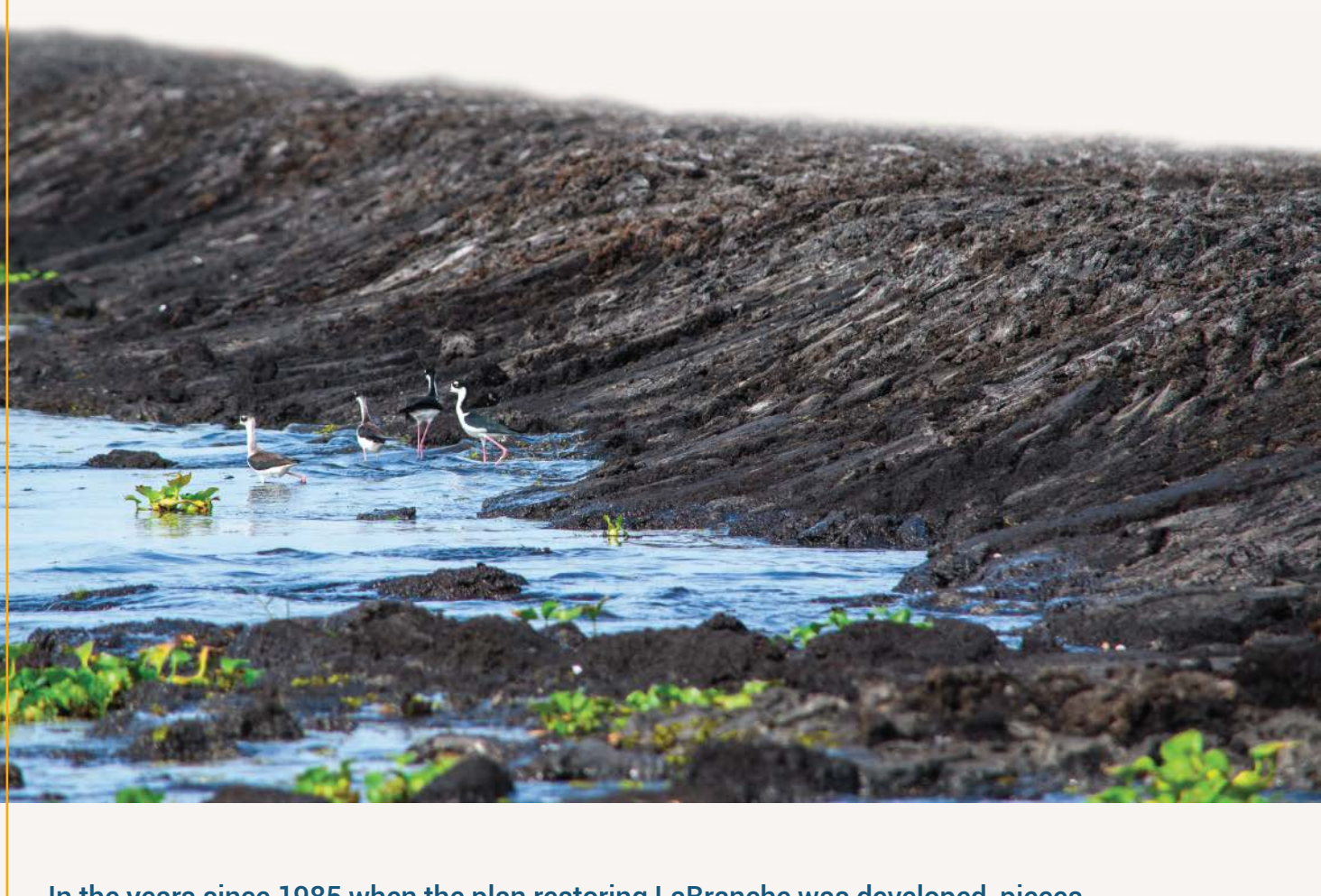
At USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), our motto is Helping People Help the Land. When you hear that, you probably picture rows of crop land. Or maybe you think about livestock grazing on pastureland. Or you could even picture acres and acres of forest lands. I bet you don't picture shallow open water in the Lake Pontchartrain Estuary, though. Perhaps you will after you hear about our work on one of the largest marsh creation projects in Louisiana.

The LaBranche Wetlands ecosystem contains the largest contiguous tract of wetlands along the south shore of Lake Pontchartrain - approximately 20,000 acres of tidally influenced marshes and cypress swamps. Interstate 10 passes over the LaBranche Wetlands between the Jefferson-St. Charles Parish line and the Bonnet Carré Spillway, making it one of the most highly visible wetlands in the State. This area may look like open water right now, but it used to be home to a thriving marsh ecosystem until saltwater began to kill off the marsh.



If you live anywhere near New Orleans, you've likely heard about the saltwater wedge working its way up the Mississippi River. This saltwater intrusion into areas where there is normally fresh water is causing major problems, particularly affecting the drinking water supply for residents in the surrounding areas. What's happening right now with the saltwater wedge is like what has been happening over decades in the LaBranche Wetlands area. The construction of the railroad and interstate along with damage from major hurricanes through the years has disturbed the wetlands ecosystem leading to further erosion and allowing saltwater intrusion. The result is marsh converting to open water and it's a vicious cycle that continues to eat away at the marsh.

NRCS has been helping landowners in the LaBranche Wetlands fight coastal wetland deterioration and the subsequent loss of wetland habitat for several decades. In 1985, NRCS, in cooperation with the Crescent Soil and Water Conservation District, finalized a marsh conservation plan to address the natural resource concerns within the LaBranche Wetlands on a larger scale. The plan was permitted by the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), New Orleans District. Much work has been done since the development of the conservation plan. However, until recently, funding and engineering challenges hindered any real progress to restore the marsh.



In the years since 1985 when the plan restoring LaBranche was developed, pieces fell into place to make the plan of restoring the LaBranche marsh a reality. The Breau Act, more commonly known as Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection, and Restoration Act (CWPPRA) passed in 1990 and funds the design and construction of coastal wetlands restoration projects. CWPPRA is managed by 5 federal agencies (NRCS, US Army Corps of Engineers, Environmental Protection Agency, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) and the State of Louisiana's Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA).

Fast forward more than 30 years... It took some time, but the LaBranche marsh creation project competed for CWPPRA funding and was approved to move forward after consolidating it with another project in the area. Officially dubbed the LaBranche East Marsh Creation Project, the plan is to create approximately 1500 acres of marsh with an expected completion date in mid-year 2025. It is located adjacent to the original CWPPRA project and the 2 projects combined will form almost 2000 acres of contiguous emergent marsh providing benefits to the Lake Pontchartrain Estuary and the Lake Pontchartrain Basin. That's roughly 10% of the LaBranche Wetlands! When the project is complete, it will contain: over 10 miles of containment dike, 6.1 million cubic yards of fill material, over a mile of tidal creeks, and 39 interior ponds.

You're probably wondering... why does it matter that this once thriving marsh ecosystem is disappearing? And, why are we spending so much time, effort, and money to try to rebuild it? The most basic answer is that if we don't do something, we'll continue to lose marsh and the effects will continue to compound negatively.



We get several benefits from having a healthy marsh, most of which you may never actually notice. The most obvious and visual benefits are better wildlife habitat with increased diversity and enhanced recreational opportunities in the area. The not-so-noticeable benefits are equally, if not more, important. The marsh serves as a large filter improving water quality for the ecosystem it supports as well as for us. It also acts as a buffer helping protect critical transportation infrastructure (the railroad and I-10) during storms. I-10 is a key hurricane evacuation route for the New Orleans Metropolitan area and reestablishing marsh and improving the wetlands surrounding the area supports strong, reliable routes to safety. And finally, healthy marshes can help slow the effects of flooding during heavy rains lessening the impacts to the surrounding area.

So, the next time you're heading down I-10 between LaPlace and New Orleans, take the opportunity to admire the work being done to rebuild our marsh. Or, check out the piece Fox 8's John Snell just did on our project: Coast in Crisis: Labranche Wetlands restoration project working alongside I-10 (fox8live.com).

