

STATE OF LOUISIANA

EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT

BATON ROUGE

PROCLAMATION NO. 55 MJF 2000

*DECLARATION OF STATE OF EMERGENCY
LOSS OF SALTWATER MARSHES*

- WHEREAS,** forty percent (40%) of the saltwater marshes in the contiguous United States are found in the state of Louisiana; nonetheless, Louisiana has lost more than fifteen hundred (1,500) square miles of marsh since 1930, which is the highest rate of land loss in the nation, and Louisiana is continuing to lose marsh at a rate of twenty-five (25) to thirty-five (35) square miles a year;
- WHEREAS,** saltwater marshes are vital to the state of Louisiana as both a critical component of the state's coastal wetland ecosystem and a first line of defense in the state's coordinated system to protect coastal communities against harm from storm surges and hurricanes;
- WHEREAS,** during the spring of 2000, state and federal officials made the alarming discovery of the "brown marsh phenomenon," an unusually extensive and rapidly spreading browning of the normally lush green saltwater marsh grass *Spartina alterniflora*, known more commonly as oyster grass or smooth cordgrass (hereafter "marsh grass");
- WHEREAS,** a collaborative team of state and federal officials and university scientists, coordinated by the governor's executive assistant for coastal activities, promptly mobilized to determine a) the extent of the affected marsh area, b) whether the phenomenon is spreading, c) the causes of the phenomenon, d) the possible short-term protective measures and long-term remediation and/or recovery strategies, and e) the possible funding sources for research and remediation to prevent the reoccurrence of the phenomenon;
- WHEREAS,** the collaborative team determined that the saltwater marsh area in the state of Louisiana primarily affected is located between the deltas of the Atchafalaya River and the Mississippi River in the parishes of Lafourche, Terrebonne, Jefferson, and Plaquemines, centering in the *Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary* (hereafter "Estuary"), a fragile wetland area containing approximately 390,000 acres of saltwater marsh, of which about 110,000 acres is severely impacted and about 150,000 acres is moderately impacted;
- WHEREAS,** of the severely impacted saltwater marsh acreage in the Estuary, at least 17,000 acres of marsh grasses has already converted from dense vegetation to open mud flats with little or no vegetation and without roots to hold the land together and prevent erosion; consequently, it is likely that Louisiana's already staggering rate of annual land loss will be greatly exacerbated;
- WHEREAS,** although the investigations of the collaborative team are still on-going, preliminary findings indicate the likely cause of the phenomenon is a lack of fresh water flow resulting from record drought, record high temperatures, abnormally low water levels in the Mississippi River during the spring, and unusually low summer tides,

the combination of which severely compounded the long-term effects of the nation's extensive levee system, which alters the natural fresh water flow, on Louisiana's saltwater marshes;

WHEREAS, the combination of recent events and the nation's levee system has caused a lack of fresh water and/or periodic flooding essential to saltwater marshes for replenishing the water table and maintaining the normal salinity levels of the marshes; and

WHEREAS, the brown marsh phenomenon constitutes a natural disaster, with potentially catastrophic results, and it has created an immediate threat to public health and safety, the environment, and public and private property;

NOW THEREFORE, I, M.J. "MIKE" FOSTER, JR., Governor of the state of Louisiana, by virtue of the authority vested by the Constitution and the laws of the state of Louisiana, do hereby order and direct as follows:

SECTION 1: A state of emergency is declared to exist in the parishes of Lafourche, Terrebonne, Jefferson, and Plaquemines (hereafter "parishes"), as a result of the "brown marsh phenomenon," an unusually and rapidly spreading browning of the normally lush green saltwater marsh grass *Spartina alterniflora*, which has caused an immediate threat to public health and safety, the environment, and public and private property.

SECTION 2: The state of emergency declared in Section 1 shall continue in effect until November 1, 2001, unless the state of emergency is terminated or rescinded prior to that date.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have set my hand officially and caused to be affixed the Great Seal of Louisiana, at the Capitol, in the city of Baton Rouge, on this 23rd day of October, 2000.

GOVERNOR OF LOUISIANA

**ATTEST BY
THE GOVERNOR**

SECRETARY OF STATE