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Re-creating coastland

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PECAN ISLAND — A roseate spoonbill floated like a pink paintbrush across the sky as Gary Camardelle of Lafitte revved his airboat and skimmed over the shallow lake, a rooster-tail of spray arcing in his wake.

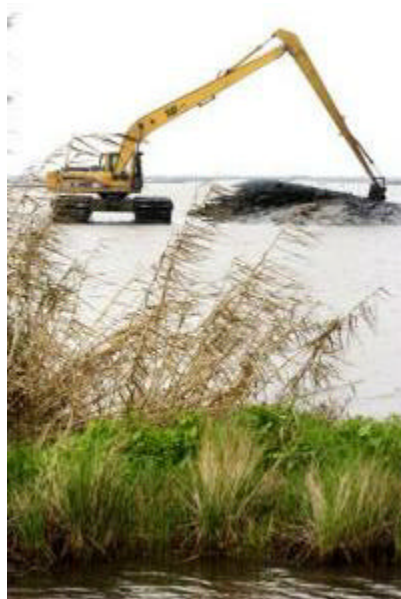
Looming ahead were what looked like small islands in a modified grid pattern. The Pecan Island Terracing Project is one of the latest coastal restoration initiatives being built through a partnership of the state Department of Natural Resources and the National Marine Fisheries Service.

On a field trip to the project area in the marsh just south of La. 82, Camardelle, supervisor of construction crews from Wilcox Marsh Buggies of Harvey, negotiated his airboat in

18 inches of water as excavators mounted on tracks, like tanks, scooped up lake bottom to create a series of raised berms.

"There will be 476 terraces when the project is complete," he said. "Grass is already growing on the first ones." When visitors walked on some of the early berms, Camardelle cautioned them not to try it on the newer ones. "Unless you want to sink in up to your waist — it might make a good picture."

The terraces will act as wind and wave buffers, curbing erosion and trapping sediment to protect 3,550 acres of threatened wetlands in southeast Vermilion Parish, five miles north of the Gulf of Mexico. Marsh grass is planted on the earthen mounds to help bind and protect them against the effects of time and tide.



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A floating backhoe finishes off one of the hundreds of 45-foot-by-500-foot terraces in a flooded area south of White Lake. A natural terrace in the foreground can be seen trapping soil.

Excavator operator Paul Guilbeaux of Coteau used his bucket to bite into the lake bottom and deposit the dredged material on top of a berm. He tamped it down with the back of his bucket, like making an impression in mud with one's knuckles.



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DNR engineering technician Stan Aucoin fought the brisk wind to keep his flat-bottomed skiff in place.

A backhoe mounted on a marsh buggy builds one of the terraces by dredging the 3-foot lake bottom.

Mel Guidry, the project manager for the state, said the \$3 million project is about 25 percent complete. It will be finished in mid-May, when smooth cordgrass and California bulrush will be planted on all but 15 berms, which will be used as part of an experiment.

Like a similar project in nearby Little Vermilion Bay, the terraces also create ideal habitat for tiny marine organisms, the bottom of a food chain whose upper links include game fish and shellfish. Shrimp, crabs and many species of fish are drawn to inland areas to take advantage of the protected conditions.

Berms not planted with vegetation are part of a secondary project to see what will grow naturally on the raised mounds of dredged soil. Christine Thibodaux, coastal resources scientist with DNR's Coastal Restoration Division office in Abbeville, is overseeing the project as part of her master's degree studies.

"It's an example of how DNR allows employees to do graduate school work as part of our job duties, so we can become better at what we do," she said. Thibodaux is working on her master's in Environmental Biology at UL Lafayette under Robert Twilley, a world-renowned expert in the study of coastal eco-systems.

John Foret, the project manager for the fisheries service, said the terracing project is an exciting opportunity. "The bottom line is we are creating new marsh. Everyone has heard of how much wetlands are losing each year to erosion, so to get the chance to grow new marsh, where only open water was before, is very satisfying."

Guidry said more than 440 acres of new coastal wetlands are projected to be created in the next 20 years. He said the project area "was all cattle pastures in the 1950s, when the land was diked and pumped off to keep it dry. This shows how much solid land has reverted back to open water over the years."

The north wind whipped small whitecaps across the surface of the lake. A pair of ducks flushed from a stand of Roseau cane. They flapped against the wind making little headway, then banked like hang-gliders and plopped down in a parchment-colored shock of thick marsh grass.

The Pecan Island project is funded through the federal Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act, commonly known as the Breaux Bill after its sponsor, U.S. Sen. John Breaux, D-Crowley.

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