

“Pathways to Progress on the Gulf Coast: The Necessity of Funding Networks”

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The recently announced focus of President Obama in the Gulf Coast is to develop a restoration plan in cooperation with states, local communities, tribes, fisherman, conservationists and Gulf residents, to make sure that the Gulf states suffering from the oil spill are made whole again. This is good.

But while the disaster is multi-faceted, attacking fragile environments, families, and commerce at all levels, the solutions to make the region “whole again” cannot be a restoration of pre-April conditions. Those conditions were, by definition, the very brink of disaster. Why go back to that same explosive mix of risk factors?

We need a different vision, and a different visioning process, to take us to a future that’s both more practical and more sustainable. That means different partners, not the same list of suspects that blew up the Gulf. New thinking is needed to re-engage those who are being so profoundly affected by the loss of their homes, jobs, lifestyles, histories and futures.

One thing is sure: Nothing’s going to work – whether engineered by the government or by big business – unless the recovery is built with the networks of local assets and human resources still in place and available to help. We see them in every TV broadcast: real people itching to be tapped and deployed in genuine service to the place they love and need, looking helpless for lack of the just-right call to help build the new environments that can sustain the biodiversity of the region, and the commerce that can thrive in it.

On the Gulf Coast are communities -- relationships among people, networks of relationships, and networks of networks. These relationships could and should provide the muscle, direction, and spirit of rescue missions and building efforts. The networks we’re talking about are small scale but thoroughly human, diverse, and surprisingly powerful when focused. We’re talking church groups, fishing clubs, giving circles, quilting bees, service clubs, PTAs, fraternal organizations, alumni groups, professional associations, and the like. There are thousands of these, maybe even millions, waiting on the Coast – an army of civic might.

This army has to be mobilized and recruited into the fight.

Funding is needed to get people plugged in so they can participate. Funding is needed to bring people together for conversations about possibilities, to be the skunk works and laboratories for good new ideas, solutions, and approaches to a meaningful future. Funding is needed to support leadership at all levels so that innovation and talent can surface and get moved along, so that small clusters of people with needed resources can become larger clusters of people and organizations with needed resources.

Investing in this kind of civic process is like investing in the human fabric that can hold and sustain life. Neither BigOil nor BigGov will address this, at least not anytime soon. Soon has to mean now, and we need some quicker checkbooks than the Bigs are using.