



Deputy Mayor Cedric Grant

*Delta Cities Conference*

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Prepared Remarks

Your Royal Highness Prince Willem Alexander,

Honorable Ahmed Aboutaleb,

Your Excellencies, Ministers, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you so much for providing this opportunity to come together in Rotterdam at this important time in the world's history.

It's often been said that the only thing we learn from history is that we do not learn from history.

But we, as powerful voices in our communities, have the power to change that. The question is, do we have the will? Can we find a way or make one?

Last month we in New Orleans commemorated the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, both a natural and man-made disaster which killed 1836 American citizens and flooded 80 percent of a great international city. Sustainable redevelopment is the challenge as my city rebuilds and recreates itself.

Short-term solutions or half measures will no longer suffice. Storms are more powerful and destructive. Category 5 storms are coming and the buffer of wetlands on our coast has been degraded so severely that it no longer can fully protect the urban core of New Orleans. And looking to the future, we must prepare for the unpredictable impact climate change will have on coastal communities like New Orleans.

These are some of the world's most complicated challenges and also some of the most costly to address. But we have no choice but to face them head on. We must remember that it's not just a matter of our way of life; it's a matter of life and death.

It is because the dangers are so clear and present that coastal communities like New Orleans are uniquely poised to chart a new way forward. We must be the ones to set the standard for community renewal and sustainable development. We who live in the worlds deltas or on the edges of great oceans are the most immediate laboratory for innovation and change, and our success or failure will be the symbol for the world's ability to accomplish great things, or not.

But for all coastal cities our future is not just about survival. It's about sustainability. It's about redemption. It's about getting this right, for now and for the generations to come.

For New Orleans, hurricanes are nothing new. I remember as a kid, we'd batten down the hatches, mama would empty the ice box, the power went out early, and school closed for a few days as the neighborhood cleaned up. That was it. Hurricane Betsy in 1965 was the last really big storm which devastated large sections of New Orleans. Many in my generation never fully appreciated the power of the Gulf of Mexico simply because none of us had seen what it could do. But Katrina humbled us. It was a rude awakening to the dangers we face.

In 2008, a full three years after Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Gustav showed how much Louisiana had learned its lesson. New Orleans was evacuated well ahead of the storm and we moved over a

million residents out of the region. There was command and control between local, state and federal officials and the improved levee system held.

But Hurricane Gustav brought to bear another existential challenge for Louisiana. New Orleans was spared from a direct hit, but communities further inland that historically had been beyond hurricanes' reach were severally impacted. Much of the protective shield provided by our barrier islands and wetlands is gone. For almost one hundred years, the Louisiana coast has been slashed and burned. Louisiana's wetlands are the fastest disappearing in the world. Since 1930, over 1,900 square miles of marsh have been lost. Every year, 15,300 acres of coast evaporate into the Gulf of Mexico. By the time I finish this speech, another acre will have vanished.

The wetlands are Louisiana's natural protection against hurricanes. For every three miles of marsh a storm surge is reduced by nearly one foot. But the wetlands have become so depleted that Hurricane Gustav hit populated areas at nearly full force.

In 2008, Gustav made clear that as the wetland buffer shrinks, the two million people who live in the coastal areas of Louisiana may soon face a choice between their beloved community and their family's safety. No one should be forced to make such a choice.

It's important to note that the destruction of Louisiana wetlands is a direct result of human actions, not Mother Nature. Over the past 70 years levee and dam construction in Midwest and Plains states further inland have stopped the natural flow of the river from depositing sediments that build up marshes and estuaries. Most damaging, are the oil companies' 10,000 miles of canals and pipelines. They snake through our marshes and bring oil and gas to onshore refineries in order to provide energy for the people of America. These pipelines and canals provide a pathway for saltwater from the Gulf of Mexico to flood, poison, and kill our wetlands.

Acres vanish, islands of trees are submerged, and waves lick close to our homes and our communities. It seems to have happened so quickly, but really it is generations in the making.

Southern Louisiana must face a series of profound, interconnected challenges including bigger hurricanes, an eroding coast, rising sea levels, and a toxic flow of pollution from the Mississippi River. As time passes these problems worsen. We must act with urgency before it is too late.

It is time to change course, innovate, adapt, and hope for a better future. But hope is no substitute for a plan. We know how to restore our coast and stop climate change. We know the importance of land-building diversions and sediment pumping systems. We know the importance of conservation and reducing CO2 emissions. Some of the world's best minds have dedicated their lives to solving these problems. We have the way -- now we need the will and the resources.

But it's also a matter of economic sense. The world's economy cannot exist without coastal and delta communities. We are gateways-- key trading points to vast natural resources, and abundant energy sources. Every year, Louisiana's coast provides America with more oil and gas than the nation imports from Saudi Arabia. Louisiana is home to five of America's top 15 busiest ports and 460 million tons of goods are annually shipped down the Mississippi to the world and moved up the river to the heartland.

And let us not take for granted that coastal communities provide the world with fish. Louisiana's coast is the nursery of the Gulf of Mexico, home to the second largest fishing industry in America, annually accounting for 30% of all seafood consumed by Americans.

So whether it is food, clothing, metals, or oil, the rest of the world can rely on us coastal communities to put food on the table, keep the lights on and gas in the tank.

We must preserve and protect what we have left. American President Theodore Roosevelt set the course, writing, "It is not what we have that will make us a great nation; it is the way in which we use it." It is time to stop exploiting our resources in a way that is economically hypocritical, environmentally ignorant, and morally wrong.

Looking to the future, we know the threat of climate change looms. And it looms especially large for the coastal communities that many of us gathered here call home. As the earth warms, water levels rise. That's a matter of science, not opinion. It can be seen happening all over the world and will further complicate our flood protection and coastal land loss issues.

We can change. We must.

Our future will be defined by our actions now.

Associations like the Connecting Delta Cities network will show the world how government, businesses and people, acting in concert, can solve these big problems, protect the coastal communities that we all rely on and turn crisis into opportunity.

Frustration into motivation. Tragedy into triumph.

We can take a lesson from the Netherlands. Their leadership and innovation in water management has changed the world. Dozens of coastal communities look here, to Rotterdam, to discover how to ensure a sustainable future. Your work gives us all hope that our children and grandchildren will be able to live and work on the water. Just like the Dutch, we will innovate and act to save our communities.

This moment will define the 21<sup>st</sup> century and we cannot afford to fail. The challenge has been laid before us. It will test our resolve. The world is holding its breath to see if we, as a global society, can still do great things.

But, we have been here before, faced challenges as large and as difficult. And we have overcome.

Again and again, our will has been tested.

And together, we will find a way or make one.