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The last Senate race of 2016 is playing out on a disappearing battleground

Foster Campbell is a rare voice in Louisiana politics because he talks about climate change—a lot.



Aerial view of St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana. CREDIT: AP Photo/Gerald Herbert

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA—On Saturday, Louisianans will head to their local precincts to settle the country's last outstanding Senate race. In just a few decades, many of those precincts could be underwater.

Louisiana is simultaneously the first state in the U.S. to literally lose ground to climate change and the home of some of the most aggressive climate deniers in politics.

“We are the canary in the coal mine,” Cynthia Sarthou, executive director of the Gulf Restoration Network, told ThinkProgress. “We are the first coastal community along the Gulf Coast really facing the challenge that is going to face all the other states as sea level rises.”



CREDIT: Screenshot, Foster Campbell for U.S. Senate ad

To national Democrats, Senate runoff candidate Foster Campbell represents a final shot to weaken the Republicans' hold on the Senate. But in Louisiana politics, Campbell stands out for another reason: he talks about coastal erosion and climate change—a lot.

“Nineteen out of the top 20 scientists in the world believe we have global warming,” Campbell told the Baton Rouge Advocate in September. “It’s because of problems we’ve done as humans. It’s a priority with me.”

That’s not an easy position to tout in Louisiana, where much of the state economy is based on the fossil fuel industry. Even the other Democrat in the race, Caroline Fayard, initially gave the familiar “I’m not a scientist” response when asked if humans were responsible for climate change.

Campbell also recently released an ad touting his support for a lawsuit to force energy companies to pay to restore coastal wetlands damaged by oil and gas development. The ad accuses his runoff opponent, Republican John Kennedy, of being “in the pocket” of oil and gas companies.

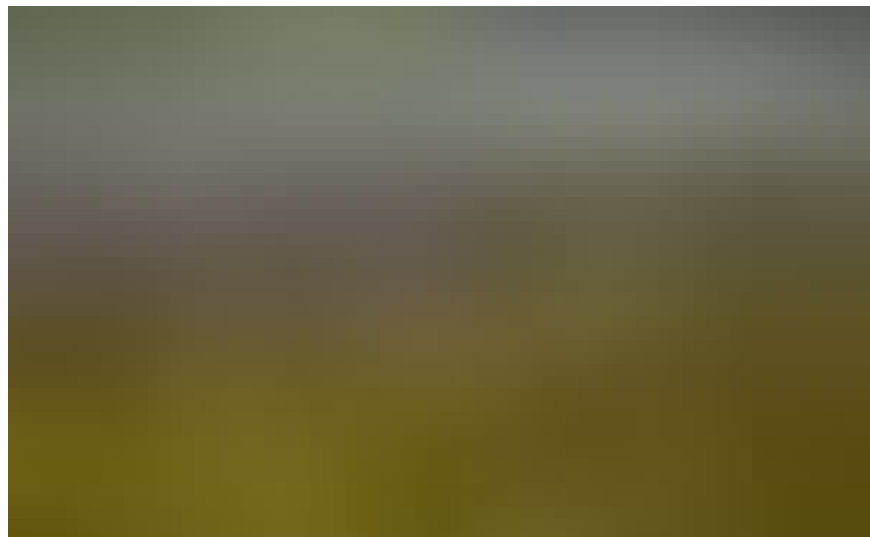
Kennedy, who currently maintains a comfortable lead over Campbell, has pledged to fight for oil and gas companies and repeal “needless regulations.”

“Too many people in Louisiana are hurting from the liberal policies that this administration has heaped on our oil and gas industry,” he said.

“We are the canary in the coal mine.”

This is the more typical position of Louisiana’s current representatives in Congress, most of whom enjoy close relationships with oil and gas companies. With President-elect Donald Trump poised to take office, Sarthou noted the state delegation is “front and center” in the chorus of Republican lawmakers calling for a repeal of regulations and executive orders that hamper oil and gas development.

“We are the state that’s now feeling the greatest impacts from climate change. And yet we are also the state whose delegation is one of the most resistant to reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, diversification of our fuel sources,” Sarthou said. “To me, it’s shooting yourself in the foot. It’s totally ignoring the danger when you, in fact, are the one who’s going to bear the biggest brunt of that issue.”



Disappearing marshland, once a cypress forest, outside New Orleans. CREDIT: AP Photo/Gerald Herbert

In a recent interview, Campbell laid out the stakes even more bluntly: “If we continue to fail on this front, Louisiana will soon disappear.”

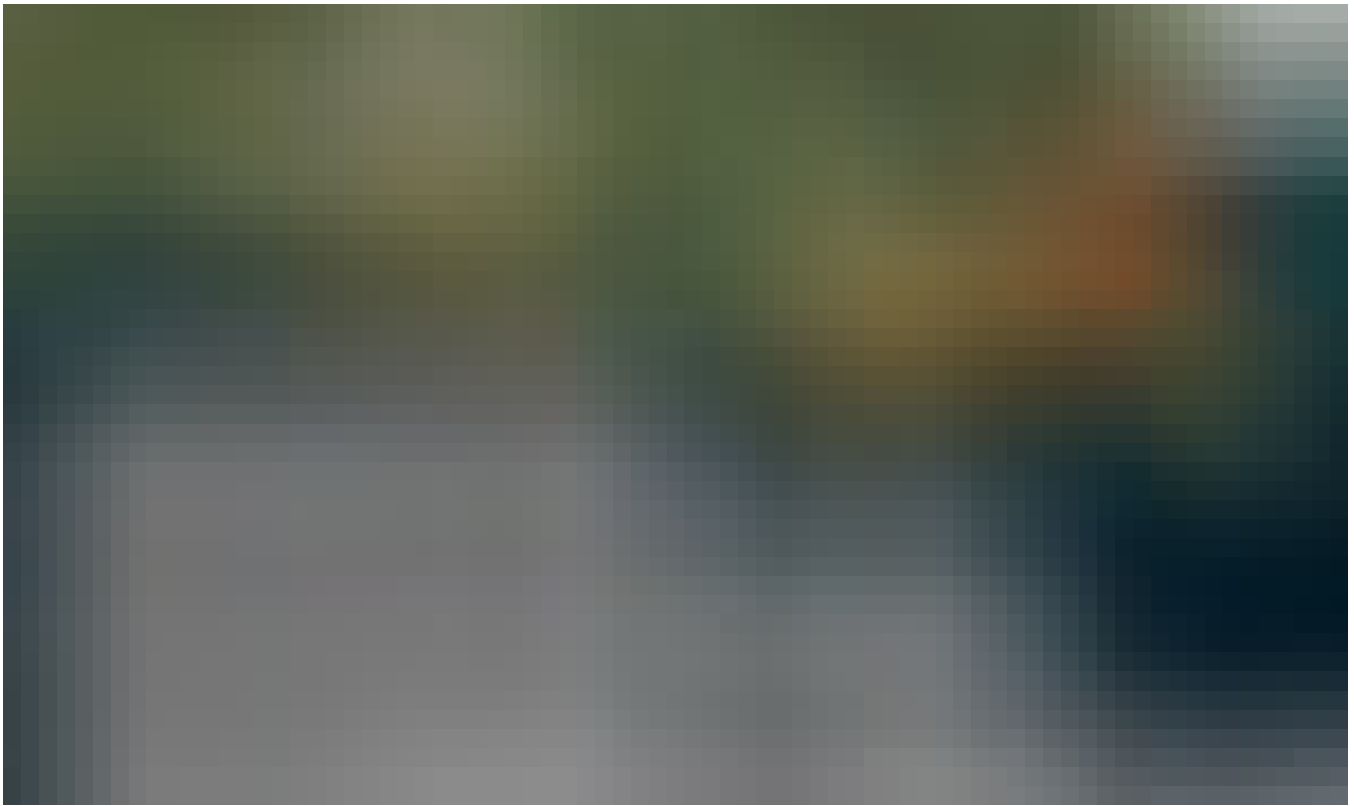
This isn’t hyperbole. Decisions made during the next four years could deal a fatal blow to Louisiana’s coastal communities, many of which are already facing inevitable destruction from sea level rise. Trump has

vowed to expand offshore drilling and weaken regulatory agencies that protect communities from pollution. But even under today's status quo, current projections show that the future is dim for Louisianans.

While national attention is on its Senate race, Louisiana is also preparing its Coastal Master Plan, an assessment of coastal erosion and sustainable strategies to restore land that gets updated every five years. The projections for sea level rise have already increased dramatically since the 2012 plan was released.

“In the last five years, the state's worst case scenario in the last plan has become the best case scenario this time. That tells you a lot,” Sarthou said.

While crafting the new plan, Louisiana's government has been forced to acknowledge the reality that much of its coast is unsalvageable. In a little-noticed move, the state recently designated certain flood-prone areas “Resettlement Zones,” in which residents are encouraged to voluntarily relocate or fend for themselves when the area inevitably floods.



One of Gulf Restoration Network's resettlement zone maps.

The Gulf Restoration Network created maps of the regions that fit the government's criteria, estimating that about 2,000 people already live in these resettlement zones and hundreds of thousands more will be displaced within the next 50 years.

Now, the organization's attention will turn to helping these communities—many of which are still deeply skeptical that climate change exists, Sarthou said—lobby the government for short-term resources and funds to relocate.

Trump and Republican leadership are preparing to scale back regulation and expand oil and gas drilling on the basis that climate change is not a real threat. But for Louisiana, climate change has become a question of how to adapt, not how to prevent.

"Louisiana is going to be one of the biggest losers," Sarthou said.

Aviva Shen, a former ThinkProgress editor, is now a freelance writer in New Orleans focused on criminal justice.

