

La. coastal restoration chief stepping down

BY MARK SCHLEIFSTEIN

Staff writer

Chip Kline, the state's point man on coastal restoration and hurricane risk reduction who shepherded major projects to address land loss during his five years at the helm, announced his resignation Wednesday as Gov. John Bel Edwards' tenure winds down.

In an interview on his time in office, Kline warned Edwards' eventual successor against abandoning progress made on coastal restoration, saying Louisiana would face "dire consequences" if that were to occur.

Kline, whose resignation takes effect on July 3, made the announcement at the biennial State of the Coast conference in New Orleans. He first served briefly as chairman of the state's Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority in 2015, when Bobby Jindal was still governor, and was reappointed to the key post under Edwards in 2018. He has also served as coastal activities director in Edwards' office and was an adviser to Jindal on coastal matters.

He will be replaced by Bren Haase, who is now executive director of the authority and has worked there since its founding in 2007. Kline said Greg Grandy will become acting executive director of the authority, moving up from his position as deputy director.

"If you look back over the last several years, what we have been able to accomplish across south Louisiana is something, quite frankly, that I never envisioned," Kline said in an interview last week. "While I know full well that it's time to move on, it's also very hard. It's difficult to walk away from something that you've put your heart and soul into."

Kline said he has not decided where he would end up next, but it likely would be some sort of government relations position in the private sector.

"Chip has overseen some of the biggest coastal restoration projects in our state's history despite the challenges of multiple natural disasters," Edwards said in a statement. "Few people are as knowledgeable about the needs of our coast as Chip is, but I am confident that current CPRA Executive Director Bren Haase with his extensive experience is ready to take on the role of chairman."

The CPRA and its 50-year coastal master plan have gained plaudits nationwide for a science-based approach to addressing coastal issues. Polling has indicated Louisianans across the political spectrum support those efforts, though there have been concerns over whether Edwards' successor will maintain the same approach given the politicization of climate change and related issues.

During Kline's leadership of the state's coastal efforts, the state Legislature unanimously adopted the 2017 and 2023 updates of the state's \$50 billion, 50-year coastal master plan of restoration and hurricane risk reduction projects, and unanimously adopted eight annual restoration and levee plans totaling more than \$7.6 billion.

During that time, the state has rebuilt or improved nearly 41 square miles of coastal land, restored nearly 23 miles of barrier islands, and improved more than 83 miles of hurricane risk reduction levees.

As the state's official trustee, Kline also represented state interests in spending billions of dollars in funds stemming from the federal-state settlement with BP and its drilling partners for the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster and oil spill.

He also recommended to Edwards the creation of the Climate Initiatives Task Force, which produced the state's climate action plan, aimed at reducing the state's greenhouse gases to a net-zero level by 2050.

Kline lists the federal and state approval of construction of the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion among his top achievements. The \$2.92 billion diversion in Plaquemines Parish, just north of the town of Ironton, will direct as much as 75,000 cubic feet per second of sediment-laden Mississippi River water into Barataria Bay, where it is expected to create or sustain as much as 21 square miles of land at the end of 50 years.

Groundbreaking for the diversion - which is strongly opposed by commercial fishers - is scheduled for Aug. 4.

"If you look at what Mid-Barataria delivers for southeast Louisiana, from a land-building perspective, from a land-sustaining perspective, it's really the project that I believe is the lifeline for southeast Louisiana," Kline said.

But just as important, Kline said, were recent decisions by Congress to finally invest federal funds in the 98-mile Morganza-to-the-Gulf hurricane levee protecting Houma and other communities in Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes.

Kline said that when Edwards appointed him chairman in 2018, a conversation he had with officials in those two parishes was about the failure of the federal government to invest "a single dime" in the levee, even though Congress authorized its construction in 2007 and the state and local governments have already invested close to \$1 billion in its construction.

Through CPRA and parish officials' work with the state's congressional delegation, more than \$400 million was included in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and a hurricane-related emergency supplemental bill, he said.

Not far behind, Kline points out, were similar efforts aimed at building a large chunk of what he calls a hurricane risk reduction fortress across the state:

- Supporting Army Corps of Engineers efforts for the New Orleans to Venice levee systems on the east and west banks of the Mississippi in Plaquemines Parish;
- Completion of the New Orleans area hurricane levee system and obtaining funds to keep it at present risk reduction levels for the next 50 years, and possibly improving that risk reduction level for the east bank portions of the system;
- Beginning construction of the West Shore Lake Pontchartrain levee system for parts of St. Charles and St. John the Baptist parishes.
- Obtaining approval of new Upper Barataria levees for west bank St. Charles and Lafourche parishes, and of new hurricane risk reduction projects for St. Tammany Parish.
- Receiving Corps and congressional approval of southwest Louisiana wetlands and risk reduction projects, including the initial elevation of more than 1,000 homes in Lake Charles, Cameron and Vermilion parishes.

Kline recognizes the significance of the timing of his decision to step down and the uncertainty in how Edwards' successor will support the coastal authority.

"I do know this for sure: Whoever the next governor is must keep the momentum going on this effort," Kline said. "Because we have set the stage for the next governor to be, maybe, even more successful in the restoration and protection of our coasts than any other governor before."