

Fighting the wrong ideas

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A recent report by the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana suggests that there are ongoing conceptual battles that have yet to be won before this state can complete its recovery from the 2005 hurricanes.

That is not just bad for the victims of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, who continue to struggle on the road to recovery from the 2005 storms. It could also be bad news for victims of this year's storms as they could well be up against some of the same misconceptions that plague victims of the earlier storms.

Among the most remarkable findings of the study were that:

People think the massive amounts of money involved in the response to Katrina and Rita made it inevitable that massive fraud and misuse of government money would be routine.

That the Mississippi Gulf Coast has completely recovered from the devastation of 2005 while Louisiana's coast continues to struggle.

That Katrina was solely as natural disaster for New Orleans.

Each of these beliefs is mistaken, of course. More importantly, each makes it more difficult for state and local officials who are continuing to fight for recovery money to get what they will need.

For instance, there is still a predominant belief that massive cases of fraud and mismanagement characterized the government's response to Katrina and Rita. While there were certainly instances of inefficiency, waste and abuse, there were also high-profile cases of prosecutions where they were appropriate. Although there were instances where the federal, state and local governments' responses were flawed, the prevalence of waste and abuse were not nearly as great as the overwhelming belief continues to be.

That persistent belief can be damaging in that it needlessly and inaccurately harms our state's reputation and could be a factor that makes it more difficult to get help in the future. We hope we are able to eventually combat the unfair image that Louisiana officials and companies took advantage of the government with impunity.

Secondly, although there have been success stories in Mississippi -- as there have been in Louisiana -- there is still much to be done there and here.

From the standpoint of encouraging future tourism and investment, we can't afford to have the prevailing belief be that Louisiana continues to struggle while Mississippi has recovered. Both states still face incredible battles on the road back to their pre-2005 conditions and there have been no magic bullets used in Mississippi's approach that were ignored here.

Lastly, people in the rest of the nation must be made to realize that the disaster that struck Louisiana was both natural -- in the sense that wind and water from Katrina and Rita struck our coast -- and manmade in that the response to the storms was woefully inadequate and was exacerbated by manmade flood-control structures that failed, many of which are still damaged. In other places, here for instance, the manmade flood-control structures are still lacking.

PAR, a nonpartisan good-government watchdog group, does a lot of good work in assessing the efforts of government. In this case, we are discouraged to see how ineffective we have been at letting people know what happened in 2005 and what is still happening on that front.

The report, though, if it is taken to heart, gives our officials a good insight into the misconceptions they must continue to fight against.

It is a fight we must continue to wage and must eventually win -- particularly as we now begin some of the same fights on behalf of this year's storm victims.

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