

This Louisiana tribe is now America's first official climate refugees

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IMAGE: GERALD HERBERT/AP

BY ANDREW FREEDMAN
5 DAYS AGO

The first climate refugees in America speak French, and live on a dwindling sliver of land that is rapidly disappearing into the Gulf of Mexico.

Residing on the Louisiana Bayou about 50 miles south of New Orleans, the Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians have seen 98% of their traditional lands disappear since 1955 due to the combination of sea level rise, land sinking, oil and gas development, and the related decline in sediment deposition from the Mississippi River.

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In a little-noticed move, the Obama administration announced on Jan. 21 that the state of Louisiana will receive about \$93 million for climate resilience projects, including enabling this tribal community to "relocate to a resilient and historically significant community."

The grant money from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was part of nearly \$1 billion in disaster recovery funds granted to 13 states and local communities to recover from prior disasters in a way that makes them more disaster-resilient.

A HUD official told *Mashable* this is the first time the department has ever funded a community's relocation due specifically to climate change.



However, other federal departments, including the Interior and Agriculture departments, may be involved in ongoing work to prepare to relocate tribal communities in Alaska that are also threatened by climate change-related trends.

It is not yet clear exactly how much the tribe will receive for the relocation, since the HUD funding will be split between that as well as a state-administered fund to help provide resilient housing, transportation, energy and economic development projects in the state's coastal zone, where erosion of land is occurring at a staggering rate.

According to a HUD document outlining the resilience awards, the state has lost 1,900 square miles of land since the 1930s. To put that into perspective, this is equivalent to having the entire state of Delaware gradually slip into the sea.

The plight of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians, who have called this land home since the mid-19th century, was documented in the 2010 documentary, [Can't Stop the Water](#), and relocating the tribe has been the subject of a 13-year-long advocacy campaign by Chief Albert White Buffalo Naquin.


"This award will allow our Tribe to design and develop a new, culturally appropriate and resilient site for our community, safely located further inland," Chief Naquin said, according to the [Institute for Southern Studies](#).

The Isle de Jean Charles [website](#) has more details on the tribe's plight:

Today, the land that has sustained us for generations is vanishing before our eyes. Our tribal lands are plagued with a host of environmental problems — coastal erosion, lack of soil renewal, oil company and government canals, and a rising sea level — which are threatening our way of life on this gradually shrinking island.

According to [Indian Country Today](#), the Isle de Jean Charles has dwindled from 11 miles long and 5 miles wide in the 1950s, to a sliver of land about one-quarter mile wide and two miles long today. This land loss has already caused the community to scatter.

"Now we're getting a chance to reunite the family," Naquin told the publication. "They're excited as well. Our culture is going to stay intact, [but] we've got to get the interest back in our youth."



A dead cypress tree protrudes from the back canal of the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO), in St. Bernard Parish, Aug. 11, 2015.

IMAGE: GERALD HERBERT/AP

The Isle de Jean Charles Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians are not the only Native tribe facing relocation due to climate change-related causes.

According to a report from the state of Louisiana, one community in Washington and at least two in Alaska are seeking or currently going through the relocation process.

During his historic trip to Alaska in August, President Obama [flew over](#) the threatened coastal community of Kivalina to see how close the people are to the increasingly ice-free and stormy seas.

The entities involved in the relocation of Isle de Jean Charles, which include HUD, the state of Louisiana and the Rockefeller Foundation, among others, hope that it will be a model for future community resettlements as seas continue to rise, imperiling more coastal communities in Louisiana and elsewhere.

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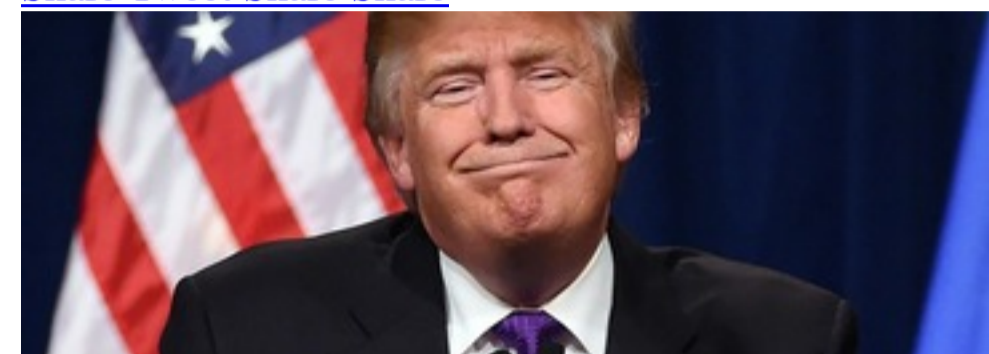
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