

Native American tribe to relocate from Louisiana coast as sea levels rise



© Julie Dermansky/Corbis 02 Jul 2012, Louisiana, USA --- Children in the Biloxi-Chimacha-Choctaw tribe run over a bridge that crosses a bayou to get to their home on Isle de Jean Charles. The area is between Pointe-aux-Chien and Isle de Jean Charles... NEW YORK, March 17 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - A small Native American community in coastal Louisiana is to be resettled after losing nearly all its land partly due to rising seas, a first in the United States.

The band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw, a Native American tribe living in the Louisiana coastal wetlands, has lost some 98 percent of its land since the 1950s.

This is the first time an entire community has had to be relocated due in part to rising sea levels, said Marion McFadden, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The land loss is also due to factors such as erosion and sediment mismanagement, a Louisiana official said.

The band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw have lived and fished on the Isle de Jean Charles in Louisiana's coastal south since the 1800s, a tribe's spokesman said.

But land loss has caused the island to shrink from some 15,000 acres to a strip of about a quarter-mile wide by a half-mile long, a study by Northern Arizona University shows.

From a peak of some 400 inhabitants, only around 100 remain. The loss of land to the sea and houses to hurricanes have caused families to leave, said Boyo Billiot, the tribe's deputy chief said in a telephone briefing to reporters.

"No one likes to leave an area where they have history, a lot of memories," said Billiot. "We are people of the bayou. Water has played a central role in who we are."

Climate advocacy group Climate Nexus said the relocation of the tribe was creating new "refugees" of climate change.

But Louisiana and federal government officials offered a different interpretation.

"We really don't think of the community as refugees. I think of refugees as being scattered and chaotic retreat. This is a resettlement and we are careful to use that word," said Patrick Forbes, a Louisiana state official.

The relocation would be subsidized by around \$48 million in government funds, said Forbes, and would take a few years to complete.

Louisiana's coast has been sinking at a fast pace compared to most U.S. coastal areas, a phenomenon officials attribute to sea levels rise but also erosion, the official said. Sea levels have already risen by some 8 inches in coastal Louisiana over the last 50 years or so.

According to a 2014 U.S. government report, as global sea levels continue to rise, relative sea level rise will be greater along some coasts such as in Louisiana and Texas.

The continuous decline of the band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw population has been threatening the tribe's ancestral traditions, including those related to fishing such as the weaving of catch nets.

"As the people leave out, culture goes with it," said Billiot.

Reflecting on the tribe's attachment to Isle de Jean Charles, he recalled his late grandfather's prophetic words.

"He said... 'The people will have to leave from the island'. But he said you all don't disturb the dead that are buried there because now a lot are in the water where the graves were at."

(Reporting by Sebastien Malo, Editing by Ros Russell; Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers humanitarian news, women's rights, trafficking, corruption and climate change. Visit <http://news.trust.org>)