

Privateer Perfection

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Nungesser, Taffaro take unlikely route to meeting with President May 28

Billy Nungesser and Craig Taffaro – the first-term parish presidents from Plaquemines and St. Bernard – must have a touch of pirate in them, because their quest to see President Barack Obama May 28 in Grand Isle was nothing short of privateer perfection.

When Obama traveled to Southeast Louisiana for his second visit to ease concerns over the oil spill response, he toured Fourchon Beach in Lafourche Parish and then made the short trip to Grand Isle to meet with local elected officials and address the public.

But for Nungesser and Taffaro, whose communities have been on the front lines of the oil fight since day one, there was one major problem: their names were not on the invitation list. Both knew a face-to-face meeting with Obama could have invaluable impact on the oil fight moving forward.

Nungesser said he especially hoped a one-on-one discussion with Obama regarding the state's proposal to build sand berms would evoke presidential pressure on the Coast Guard to finally approve the plan and British Petroleum to pay for it.

No face-to-face meeting, Nungesser feared, would mean no action from the President.

“I knew that, if we didn't get a chance to meet with the President, without him hearing the passion we have for saving the coast, our barrier island plan wouldn't have a chance of being approved,” Nungesser said.

Never afraid to take matters into his own hands, Nungesser put in a call to Taffaro.

With roads leading to Grand Isle closed and aircraft grounded ahead of Obama's visit, Nungesser and Taffaro had but one way to get to the President. They would reach Grand Isle by way of the bayous and bays of Plaquemines and Jefferson parishes.

Once the home of the Lafitte brothers' smuggling empire, the waterways would now help smuggle Nungesser and Taffaro into the meeting with the President.

From Myrtle Grove to Grand Isle

Nungesser and Taffaro met at the Plaquemines Parish Government Complex in Belle Chasse and headed down Highway 23 to Myrtle Grove. From there, they boarded a sheriff's office boat and set sail for Grand Isle.

“I like to call it the African Queen,” Nungesser said of the old wooden boat.

Nungesser, Taffaro and their entourage sped south toward Grand Isle as fast as the “African Queen” would take them. As they neared Grand Isle, though, they were met with an armada of Louisiana Wildlife and Fishery boats blocking access to the island.

“Luckily, I’d just been out with the governor on a Wildlife and Fisheries boat,” Nungesser said. As they approached the line of Wildlife and Fisheries boats, Nungesser spotted out one of the same agents who had been on the boat with the governor. When he recognized Nungesser and Taffaro, the agent waved the boat through.

Once ashore, the parish presidents went straight to the Wildlife and Fisheries station, where they thought the meeting with Obama was supposed to take place. When they discovered the meeting had been moved to the nearby Coast Guard station, they commandeered a Wildlife and Fisheries vehicle and drove up to perimeter gate.

“When we told the White House representative who we were, she checked and told us our names weren’t on the list,” Nungesser said.

Nungesser then took out his cell phone and asked the White House official to double-check the invitation list while he put a call in to CNN’s Anderson Cooper. Cooper had spent time with Nungesser earlier that week while reporting on the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

Within a minute, the representative waved Nungesser and Taffaro through the gate and on toward the meeting with the President.

From one president to another

Ever since the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded April 20, Plaquemines Parish President Billy Nungesser has, in the national media at least, become the face of the fight against time, nature and bureaucratic red tape to keep oil out of the state’s delicate marshes and estuaries.

His passionate pleas, promises and shoot-from-the-hip comments, already familiar to residents of Plaquemines Parish, have captured the nation’s attention more with every radio, television and print media interview.

And Nungesser has managed to harness that media attention, using it to spotlight weak points and inefficiencies in the response to the oil spill crisis. When Obama visited Venice May 2, Nungesser took advantage of the meeting to pitch a plan to use jack up boats along the coast as staging areas for rapid response cleanup teams.

Within days after the visit, the first jack up boat was deployed.

And it was, in part, Nungesser prodding the President during that May 28 meeting in Grand Isle that finally led to the approval – and full BP funding – of the initial six segments of Governor Bobby Jindal’s barrier island plan.

“I told him, ‘Mr. President, I have to be able to look the people of this parish in the eye and say that I’m doing everything I can to save our fishing industry, our culture and our coastline. If I can’t do that, then I’m not doing my job,’” Nungesser recalled.

Then he issued the President a similar challenge: “You have to look the American people in the eye and say the same thing. If you can’t say that, then you’re not doing your job.”