

Erosion put Louisiana coast at risk

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By **TODD J. GILLMAN** And **DAVID JACKSON** / *The Dallas Morning News*

WASHINGTON – For Louisiana, it was a race against time.

Every half hour for decades, erosion along the Gulf of Mexico claimed enough wetlands to fill a football field – eating away at the buffer New Orleans needed as protection against the Big One.

But until Hurricane Katrina roared ashore, the sense of urgency was simply lacking in Washington. Flood-control budgets were routinely shortchanged. Projects were delayed by decades. Funding came in a trickle for the marshland restoration that scientists say would have blunted such a huge storm.

Fifteen years ago, Congress awarded \$500 million to start restoring Louisiana's barrier islands. The Army Corps of Engineers soon said the job would take at least \$14 billion. But when state leaders and environmentalists met with top corps officials to ask for more, they got a brush-off that still echoes after a dozen years.

"We were told Santa Claus came once to Louisiana, and he's not coming again," recalled Mark Davis, executive director of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana.

Coastline the size of Delaware has been lost in the last 75 years. But through one administration after another, Washington seemed to treat pleas for fortified flood barriers and wetland restoration like any other bridge or highway request, as competitors for finite federal dollars.

As Mr. Davis put it, it was "just a Louisiana pork project as opposed to a national priority," even after federal emergency planners listed a catastrophic storm hitting New Orleans alongside a terrorist attack as one of the top potential disasters.

War impacts budget

Once terror did hit home, and when the U.S. invaded Iraq, budget pressures intensified, putting a squeeze on all domestic priorities, including funding for the Corps of Engineers, whose civil works projects include river control and disaster response.

War costs are expected to top \$200 billion within a few months.

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"The Iraq war doesn't have a tit-for-tat," said Paul Light, a government specialist with The Brookings Institution. "But it does have a drip-by-drip – no pun intended – in terms of pressure on the budget."

For hurricane protection on Lake Pontchartrain and vicinity, President Bush's five-year total, \$22 million, is about a fifth of the sum sought by corps and Louisiana officials.

The Bush administration budgeted \$7.5 million for fiscal 2002 and \$4.9 million for 2003. Congress boosted those allocations to \$14.2 million and \$7 million.

For years, Congress has consistently approved far more for New Orleans-area projects than the White House has proposed.

A prime example is the Southeast Louisiana Urban Flood Control Program, known as SELA, a \$744 million project begun in 1995 after a flood killed six people. So far, only \$401 million has been spent.

Because SELA was meant to improve canals and drainage in Orleans and Jefferson parishes, rather than to shore up flood barriers, experts agree that completion couldn't have kept out the floodwaters. But Gen. Strock and others have conceded that it would have sped removal of water and reduced damage.

Construction was never on a fast track. In 1997, for instance, President Bill Clinton budgeted \$10 million for the project. Congress decided to spend \$17.5 million.

And funding fell after the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

In his first five years, Mr. Bush budgeted \$166 million for SELA. Congress regularly upped the expenditures, for \$250 million five-year total – and even that was just half what the corps said it needed.

"If the core capabilities of the corps had been fully funded, the city would be in much better position to drain the streets," said lobbyist Hunter Johnston, who worked on SELA funding for New Orleans and Jefferson Parish.

As for the Iraq effect, he said, "That's not a question of flooding; it's a question of budget priorities."

White House spokesman Scott McClellan took issue with assertions that war spending squeezed out SELA and other flood projects.

"Flood control has been a priority of this administration from day one," he said.

Funding disputes have long plagued the corps.

President Jimmy Carter and Mr. Clinton tried to rein in spending. Mr. Bush forced out a director he'd picked – former GOP Congressman Mike Parker of Mississippi – after a few months when Mr. Parker complained the agency wasn't getting enough funding.

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"This transcends administrations," Mr. Parker said.

Budget-cutting target

Former House Appropriations Chairman Bob Livingston, a Republican who represented suburban New Orleans for two decades, agreed that the corps has long been a prime target for White House budget-cutters. It never helped that lawmakers also often viewed vital projects as "pork," or that environmentalists managed to stall some construction.

"There wasn't enough funding," he said. "You can blame a hell of a lot of people for that."

Iraq simply aggravated the problems, he added: "Iraq distracted from everything. ... 9-11 distracted from everything."

At the National Waterways Conference, a Washington-based group that represents shippers, ports, levee districts and dredging contractors, president Worth Hager said the corps needs \$8.4 billion to address current critical needs. The president budgeted \$4.5 billion for the corps next year. So far the House wants \$4.7 billion, the Senate \$5.3 billion.

Shortfall disputed

Lt. Gen. Carl Strock, commander of the Corps of Engineers, conceded in recent days that SELA hasn't been fully funded, but he disputes that the corps or New Orleans have been shortchanged.

"We are spending a lot of money," he said. "The Corps of Engineers is involved in the reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan, but we're able to balance that with our human resources, and it is not directly affecting our budget."

He also took strong issue with any suggestion that budget constraints or poor planning hampered efforts to protect New Orleans. Decisions were made decades ago to build levees capable of withstanding a Category 3 hurricane, not a Category 4 like Katrina. Guarding against anything more destructive would have cost exponentially more.

"The intensity of this storm simply exceeded the design capacity of this levee," Gen. Strock said. "That is the basic problem here."

Emergency planners have long known that New Orleans was at risk. Last summer, a fictitious "Hurricane Pam" hit the city in a weeklong simulation involving emergency planners, the corps and Louisiana State University scientists. It was a nightmare scenario, a Category 3 storm with 120 mph winds and 20 inches of rain. Computer models showed parts of the city covered by 20 feet of water.

Katrina was even stronger.

"Some people will say the war is taking funds, and maybe that's true. But no amount of money would have solved this problem," said Alfred Naomi, a senior project manager with the Corps in New Orleans. "If I'd had a billion dollars, we couldn't have stopped it. ... We had a Category 3 design. This was an extraordinarily strong Category 4."

As scientific consensus has grown in recent years about the importance of restoring Louisiana's coastline, the state's congressional delegation has made progress on funding – not always with the administration's help.

Earlier this summer, over Mr. Bush's objections, Louisiana lawmakers inserted a provision in the energy bill that ensures \$540 million for coastal restoration by forcing the federal government to share offshore oil and gas royalties.

A pending water bill includes \$1.9 billion for coastal restoration.

But backlogs are routine at the corps. The agency has \$50 billion worth of projects authorized by Congress but awaiting funding. One casualty has been the Hurricane Protection Project, a series of levees and floodwalls meant to protect New Orleans from surges in Lake Pontchartrain.

Congress authorized the project in 1965, and it was soon far behind schedule. By 1982, the General Accounting Office said the forecast for completion had slipped from 1978 to 2008. The current estimate is 2015 – if the corps gets the funding it says it needs.

Last year, the corps asked for \$11 million. The president budgeted \$3 million. This year's corps request was \$22.5 million. The president budgeted \$3.9 million.

Both years, Congress allotted about \$5.5 million. In May, the corps said that won't be enough to start the next phase of construction or address pressing needs – such as protecting two major pump stations the city depends on, even without a crisis.

For activists who have pressed for funding to reduce Louisiana's storm risk, the pattern is all too familiar. And Mr. Davis noted the sums sought for flood control and coastal restoration pale beside those now being spent on relief and rebuilding.

"This is a coast that has not counted Republicans or Democrats as its friends," he said.

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