EDITORIAL: Sound bites and spin jobs

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Misperceptions and unsubstantiated theories about Hurricane Katrina could overshadow science, according to the American Society of Civil Engineers, and science is what should guide those charged with protecting communities from disaster. But policymaking is also threatened by spin. Unfortunately that's what the ASCE offers in the press release that accompanies its review of the disaster analysis done by the Army Corps of Engineer's Interagency Performance Evaluation Taskforce.

The two-page document headed "Move beyond sound-bites and 'armchair' theories to make the nation safer," reads like a defense of the corps instead of an introduction to a report that's often critical of the agency. The press release claims it is a misperception that Hurricane Katrina was only a Category 3 hurricane at landfall and shouldn't have overwhelmed levees. Hurricane Katrina was one of the biggest and strongest storms to hit the U.S. coast, it says, and the storm surge "was the cause of the widespread flooding and damage in New Orleans."

No one who encountered Katrina would dispute its size or power. But that doesn't mean that the levee failures were inevitable or excusable. The system failed to stand up to the storm because of deeply flawed engineering, and that must never be given short shrift, especially by an engineering association.

By contrast, the ASCE report acknowledges as much, saying that "much of the destruction was the result of engineering and engineering-related policy failures."

The ASCE press release also argues that New Orleans would have been devastated even without the levee failures. It points to a corps computer model that says 686 of 1,118 deaths would have happened even if the levees hadn't been breached. But the ASCE report itself cited a different corps model, one that shows that nearly two-thirds of deaths would have been avoided if the levees and floodwalls remained intact and the pump stations had operated.

After The Times-Picayune editorial page raised questions about the conflicting death estimates, the ASCE added an editor's note to its press release Friday explaining that two different IPET scenarios were used. But it is disturbing that the press release initially used a figure that wasn't in the ASCE report and that minimized the corps' responsibility. The fact remains that hundreds of people died because of bad engineering.

The press release also claims that researchers found no indication of malfeasance in sections of levee that were carefully investigated. At the same time, though, the release acknowledges that neither the IPET study nor others were criminal forensic investigations. It's hard to understand why the press release would even mention the issue when it wasn't raised in the ASCE report - and the corps removed similar statements from the executive summary of the IPET report last fall.

That language was removed after a committee made up of the National Academy of Engineering and the National Research Council of the National Academies objected to IPET claims that there was no evidence of negligence or malfeasance by the corps or its contractors. Such a statement was beyond IPET's authority, those groups said. It doesn't belong in an ASCE press release, either.

David Daniel, who chaired the external review panel for ASCE, said in the release that few people will have the time to go through the 7,000-page IPET report. Few people will take the time to digest his panel's 84-page report, either. That makes the press release important, and its author should have stayed away from invalid claims and misrepresentations.

The report itself calls the engineering failures complex and says that they involved many decisions by many people within many organizations. That may be true, but that minimizes a crucial point: making the system work is the corps' responsibility, and the mistakes that proved catastrophic were attributable to one agency: the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

That's not a sound-bite, it's the truth, and the ASCE should have made sure that message got delivered.

Infobox

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