

Levee inspections only scratch the surface



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**KATRINA 2006 PULITZER
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Teams of engineers and officials from agencies in New Orleans and the state charged with inspecting the city's hurricane protection system at the start of the storm season usually have skipped the floodwalls along outfall canals exposed by Katrina as the system's Achilles' heel, documents and interviews show.

The inspections, conducted by officials from the Orleans Levee Board, the Army Corps of Engineers and the state Department of Transportation and Development, are cursory affairs that usually take five hours or less to assess the soundness of a levee system of more than 100 miles, according to itineraries of the reviews in 2003 and 2004 and interviews with some of the officials involved. The schedule typically ends early enough for the group to make it to a restaurant for lunch, records show.

Moreover, the agencies said the annual review is the only official inspection to measure the state of the city's hurricane protection. A Levee Board engineer said grass-cutting crews and other personnel are supposed to report problems they spot throughout the year and know "what a good levee looks like." Corps officials said agency employees conduct "informal, unscheduled" reviews and are also expected to sound alarms if problems are noted. But both agencies said the additional informal surveys are not planned in any comprehensive way and they likely keep no records of them.

They conceded that the inspections have not been as thorough as they should have been.

"I think it's a good 'lessons learned,'" said Jerry Colletti, the corps' operations manager for completed works, who added that inspections are likely to be far more thorough in the future. "We never had a problem prior to this. There are lots of things we now know that we should have done differently."

But state Sen. Walter Boasso, R-Arabi, who tried unsuccessfully in the recent legislative session to merge southeast Louisiana's various levee boards, called the inspections "a half-assed" effort. He said the events, in which Levee Board officials invite reporters to ride along, have always been more about public relations than scientific inquiry.

"What they have to decide is: Is the levee inspection to have their picture in the newspaper, or to do what it's really supposed to do?" Boasso said. "I think everyone has learned a big lesson here. If we're going to depend on a six-hour inspection, then shame on our government. The days of doing things half-assed are over."

An annual look

Breaches in the floodwalls along the London Avenue and 17th Street canals flooded much of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina made landfall. But records from the 2003 and 2004 reviews indicate that officials sought only to inspect the levees along Lake Pontchartrain, generally in June at the start of hurricane season, and along the Mississippi River in the fall. Officials said the June inspection sometimes included part of the river levees.

Colletti said the annual inspections generally avoided the outfall canals for two reasons: because their floodwalls were believed to be in good shape, and because it's hard for a large convoy of observers to ride to a spot where they could view them easily. The inspectors also were trying to be sensitive to residents, he said.

"We usually have about 30 vehicles on these trips, so we don't go into the neighborhoods," he said. "The 17th Street Canal, it's a bad situation because there's no road that goes along the canal. In the interest of not going into the neighborhoods, we generally stay on the outskirts, along the lakefront and the river."

Stevan Spencer, the Levee Board's chief engineer, said it has been challenging to get inspection teams close to the levees along the canals. So they have generally tried to eyeball the floodwalls from the point where the canals meet the lake -- near the Old Hammond Highway bridge on the 17th Street Canal, for instance.

"There wasn't any lengthy up-and-down (inspection) on the canals," Spencer said. "With all the houses along there, you can't really get that close to them unless you're doing maintenance work."

Colletti added that before Katrina exposed the system's flaws, engineers had ranked the canal walls low on the list of possible failures.

"We hadn't had any reports of any problems" along the canals, he said. "Our opinion, and that of the levee district and DOTD, was that those were our strong points. There was a big, solid wall with sheet pilings. There were never any previous signs of weakness."

Independent engineering teams reviewing the floodwalls since Katrina have found that sheet pilings in some sections were not as deep as corps officials had claimed or were anchored in weak soil.

Informal inspections

Records of the annual Levee Board and corps inspections show that they are fairly hasty affairs, with dozens of officials piling onto a convoy of vehicles to drive along the levees, stopping at various points for visits of 15 to 30 minutes. They review areas between stops from the cars.

The 2003 inspection, for instance, included five stops along the lakefront, none scheduled to last more than a half-hour, according to an itinerary of the review.

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But both Colletti and Spencer said there are other inspections that take place throughout the year.

"On a daily basis, our people are out in the field cutting the grass, doing work on floodgates, greasing them, that sort of thing," Spencer said. "Most of their supervisors have been here 25 or 30 years, so they know what a good levee looks like and what one with problems looks like. If there's a problem, it's looked into further."

Colletti said corps workers also look for possible problems on an ad hoc basis.

"There are lots of other nonformal inspections" of levees apart from the once-a-year official one, he said. "Our maintenance people, when they're in the area, our field folks, our construction division people -- they're keeping an eye out for certain things. There are a lot of what I would call informal, unscheduled inspections."

Because the inspections are informal, Colletti said, it's unlikely that any record of them exists.

"There's no established format for this," he said. "If you go and find a situation that needs to be corrected, then the three agencies would decide which agency has to handle the problem," referring to the Levee Board, the Corps of Engineers and the Department of Transportation and Development.

Residents' input

Colletti also said the system's safety relied in part on the faith that residents along the levees and canals would report problems they saw.

But that multiple-agency system that relied on residents failed when a problem surfaced last year along the section where the 17th Street Canal breached during Katrina. Residents of Bellaire Drive noted standing water in their yards and, suspecting a water or sewerage leak, called the Sewerage & Water Board. The board sent out a team that determined the water had seeped under the 17th Street Canal levee. But news of the problem, which Colletti said would have been a "red flag," apparently never made its way to the Levee Board or the corps. The water board, though it uses the canals to pump water to Lake Pontchartrain, has no responsibility for inspection or maintenance of floodwalls.

"For the most part, we're depending on individuals," Colletti said. "Where people had water, you'd hope they would call one of the three agencies. If we get a call on a certain case -- for instance, the issue at the 17th Street Canal, where individual residents called, had they called me or someone else at the corps, or the DOTD or the levee district, the three prime agencies, we'd immediately get the three agencies together and make an inspection."

Covering levees on foot

Colletti said it's clear that the agencies can't depend on such an informal system. In the future, he said, the corps and its partners will try to do a much more detailed inspection.

"We've decided we can't do that anymore," he said. "We've got to walk these walls. We're going to do every wall in the district on foot."

He said it will likely become an annual or biennial review, because the agency oversees hundreds of miles of hurricane protection levees.

"That's a lot of miles of levee when you talk about doing it by foot," he said. "The idea is that we will establish a program to do that on a yearly basis. But it may be you would do them only every other year."

Boasso applauded the notion of closer levee inspections. Not only should the corps walk the entire levee system, he said, but its engineers should use infrared equipment and other modern technology to get a better idea of what's lurking under the dirt.

Spencer said the Levee Board will gladly participate in any enhanced inspection system the corps devises.

"We'll be with them every step of the way," he said. "On a daily basis, our maintenance crews are going to be out there looking closer, for sure. But the corps is definitely going to be making a closer inspection of everything."

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