

Group Wants 9-11-Style Panel on Levees

By CAIN BURDEAU
The Associated Press
Monday, February 5, 2007; 9:06 PM

NEW ORLEANS -- A group of residents called Monday for Congress to set up an independent, bipartisan panel similar to the Sept. 11 Commission to investigate why levees failed during Hurricane Katrina.

Levees.org says it wants an "8/29" commission, named for the date Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in 2005. [Sen. Mary Landrieu](#) has supported the idea, as have prominent levee experts.

The new Democratic leadership in Congress has been lukewarm on setting up an entirely new commission, though, with some saying investigations can be handled through existing committees.

House Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) of California "feels the committees are well on their way on this," said spokesman Drew Hammill. "We can look at the idea of a commission. It is something worth considering."

There have already been extensive probes by three scientific panels and independent researchers.

Scientists and engineers generally agree on what physically caused the breaches _ in part, weak soil underpinning the walls and unstable designs.

But what hasn't been so clear is who made the critical decisions to sign off on certain designs over others, and whether problems at the walls were ignored.

The Army Corps of Engineers is expected to release a study soon tracing the decision-making process. But the report may do little to satisfy critics who have argued that the Corps is unable to investigate itself and that it has stymied independent scrutiny of records that tell the story from the beginning. Much of New Orleans' present-day levee system was built after Hurricane Betsy flooded the city in 1965.

"If the Dutch can protect a country that is 23 feet below sea level from a 1-in-10,000 storm, then the United States of America should have certainly protected a region that is on average 18 inches below sea level from a 1-in-100-year storm," said Sandy Rosenthal, founder of Levees.org.

An earlier study commissioned by the Corps was "basically a '9/11' investigation," said Wayne Stroupe, a Corps spokesman.

The report by the Interagency Performance Evaluation Task Force involved more than 150 national experts from more than 50 organizations and was reviewed by two independent panels, he said.

"We had to be truthful about our findings, our results and lessons learned because a lot of people were looking at this and a lot was riding on the results," Stroupe said.

© 2007 The Associated Press