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Science stronger, corps chief asserts

He says agency can stand up to politics

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By Sheila Grissett

East Jefferson bureau

An Army Corps of Engineers chief said Tuesday that the agency has a bounty of science and technology to defend its choices for hurricane protection projects against any political pressure that might be brought to bear.

Computer-driven, risk-based assessments make it possible to compare potential hurricane protection projects on the basis of how much each will reduce the risk of flooding, and at what cost to taxpayers, Maj. Gen. Don Riley said.

That wasn't the case years ago when the corps lost a battle to build butterfly gates at the mouths of the 17th Street, London Avenue and Orleans Avenue canals in New Orleans to stop hurricane-driven storm surges from Lake Pontchartrain.

"We proposed gates, and local citizens said no, fearing flooding (from) rainfall," Riley said during a meeting with the environmental nonprofit group Corps Reform Network this week in New Orleans. "We thought the greater risk was from storm surge -- feet instead of inches."

As a result, the corps abandoned the prospect of gates and instead built floodwalls along the three big outfall canals, two of which breached during Hurricane Katrina and contributed to catastrophic flooding and death.

Had the corps been equipped 15 years ago with the sophisticated risk tools being developed today, Riley said, gates might have trumped floodwalls.

"If we had to do that again, I'd say, 'Here's the risk of flooding from rainfall, and here's the risk of flooding from (storm surge),' " Riley said in response to a network member who asked what corps leaders can do if "politically pushed" to favor a less favorable project. "I'd lay it out for the (local) folks and then for the Congress and then for the public."

On an unrelated matter, Riley also said Tuesday that his agency takes seriously the allegations in a 42-page ethics complaint lodged last month by University of California-Berkeley civil engineering research professor Ray Seed....

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