

1982 report faulted protection plan

BY HECTOR SAN MIGUEL AMERICAN PRESS

The General Accounting Office took the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to task more than 20 years ago for dragging its feet over a hurricane protection plan for Lake Pontchartrain.

The issue was raised in GAO report issued Aug. 17, 1982, entitled, "Improved Planning Needed By The Army Corps of Engineers to Resolve Environmental, Technical, and Financial Issues on the Lake Pontchartrain Protection Project."

The federal government is still pumping money in the Lake Pontchartrain hurricane protection project.

U.S. Rep. William Jefferson, D-New Orleans, reported in August of last year that he was able to get \$7.5 million in federal funds for the hurricane project.

A copy of the 11-page report obtained by the American Press shows that the GAO's 1982 investigation into this issue found problems throughout the Corps' efforts to get the project done.

"Although the Corps considers this project a high priority, its progress has not kept pace with earlier completed plans. Also, estimated project costs have grown from about \$85 million to \$924 million," GAO auditors wrote in the report.

"GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Army require the Chief of Engineers to take specific steps to resolve the issues associated with this major project."

In a letter to then-Secretary of the Army John O. Marsh Jr., GAO director W.H. Sheley Jr. wrote that his office had reviewed the status of the Corps Lake Pontchartrain Hurricane Protection Project.

The project was "intended to provide hurricane protection to the Greater New Orleans metropolitan area," according to Sheley's letter.

"Although the Corps' District Office in New Orleans considers this \$924 million project a high priority, its completion date has slipped from 1978 to 2008. In the 17 years since congressional authorization in 1965, only about one half of the project has been completed," Sheley wrote.

"We believe that improved planning is needed by the Corps to resolve certain environmental, technical and financial issues. Environmental concerns have remained unresolved for almost five years after a court injunction prohibited the Corps from constructing certain parts of the project.

"The Corps is considering a change in its solution of providing protection from constructing barrier structures at the entrance of the lake and the raising of some levee heights (the barrier plan) to constructing much higher levees with no barriers (the highlevel plan)."

Sheley outlined in his letter what the "various problems and conditions" were responsible for delaying the hurricane protection project. They were:

- "Engineering and environmental concerns have caused delays in project completion."
- "Costly project work at the drainage canals has not been reported to the Congress, and technical and financial concerns which may impede project completion remained unresolved."

- “Current project financing by the local sponsors has not been assured because of limited resources.”
- “Project cost estimates are understated, and a project plan has not been formally adopted.”

Sheley recommended in his letter that the Secretary of the Army require the chief of engineers for the Corps to develop three things to get the project back on track.

They were:

- “An acquisition strategy plan, and after approval, work closely with local sponsors to acquire the necessary rights-of-way, easements, and construction priorities for the remaining portions of the project.”
- “An implementable technical approach to construction at the drainage canals that has concurrence from local sponsors.”
- “Specific milestones for completing the remaining portions of the project.”

Sheley added that it was further recommended “that the chief of engineers estimate the cost to local sponsors if the high-level plan is adopted or the barrier plan is retained and obtain their concurrence on their financial shares.”

“Corps Headquarters officials believe that additional studies need to be completed before the Corps decides which plan to pursue — barrier or high level,” Sheley wrote.

“Corps District officials believe that work on the project, except for the barrier complexes, has proceeded expeditiously. They attributed schedule delays primarily to unforeseen foundation problems, non-receipt of rights-of-way, environmental concerns and litigation.”

Sheley wrote that the same Corps officials agreed with “the intent of our recommendations.”

“They stated they are already implementing our recommendations by studying the details of the high level plan, planning to reinstate technical and financial discussions with the local sponsors for work at the drainage canal,” he wrote.

“They believed, however, any change in the Hurricane Protection Plan, could not be approved until the fiscal year 1985 budget is submitted to Congress.”

Sheley wrote that the “local sponsors” agreed with the findings of the GAO report “but were concerned over their financial capability to meet their share of project costs.”

“They believed the project construction could be pursued more expeditiously. One sponsor believed that Corps standards may be too high to obtain adequate, affordable and speedy protection,” Sheley wrote.

The 1982 report indicates that the Lake Pontchartrain Hurricane Protection Project was first authorized by the Flood Control Act of 1965.

However, by March 1982, the Corps had made available \$171 million for the project while local agencies provided another \$40 million, according to the report.

“With the exception of certain project work which has been indefinitely deferred because of environmental concerns, all areas within the protective system have been enclosed by levees, providing varying degrees of hurricane protection,” the report states.

“According to the Corps, all enclosed areas would escape flooding for all hurricanes, except for those whose intensity would occur every 60 years. When completed, the project is designed to provide for flood protection from all hurricanes, except for those whose intensity is expected to occur about one every 200-300 years.”

The report adds further that state and local officials “believed the Corps has not pursued this project with the expediency necessary to protect the New Orleans area and that only another disaster resulting from a hurricane and heightened public interest would probably expedite project completion.”

“Orleans Levee District officials believed that the Corps’ standards may be too high for what is really needed for adequate protection and for what is affordable by local sponsors,” the report states.

Levee District officials made their own recommendation, asking that the Corps “lower its design standards to provide more realistic hurricane protection to withstand a hurricane whose intensity might occur once every 100 years” instead of “a once in 200- to 300-year occurrence.”

In conclusion, the report states, “Seventeen years after project approval, residents of New Orleans are still without the hurricane protection anticipated when the project was initiated.”

The GAO is the investigative arm for Congress. Among its many duties, the agency examines the use of public funds and evaluates federal programs and policies.