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Associated Press Online

November 10, 2005 Thursday

SECTION: DOMESTIC NEWS

LENGTH: 571 words

HEADLINE: Investigations Into La. Levee Breaks Mount

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DATELINE: NEW ORLEANS

BODY:

A federal prosecutor said Thursday he's pursuing tips about corruption relating to the building and maintenance of levees that broke during Hurricane Katrina.

Meanwhile, new evidence has surfaced suggesting steel reinforcements driven into parts of the failed levee system were not nearly as deep as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had thought.

U.S. Attorney Jim Letten said his office is focused on the political and business relationships of those involved in building the levees, not whether the levees were poorly designed or improperly built.

"We're not in the business of trying to second-guess if something could have been designed and built better," Letten said. "Our investigation is looking into whether there was illegal conduct, whether it be diversion of funds ... that would have contributed to poor execution of the work."

Letten refused to give names or discuss specifically what officials or others were alleged to have done. He said only that he had received "information that there were individuals in positions of responsibility that had conflicts of interest, and that's something we're always interested in."

Letten declined to say whether he's investigating federal or local officials. However, local agencies handle most of the building and maintenance of levees.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is officially responsible for design and construction, but sometimes that means little more than reviewing plans and inspecting work.

Design drawings show that steel pilings reinforcing the levees should have been driven to a depth of 17 feet below sea level.

Preliminary findings by an investigative team, however, suggest that didn't happen in the case of the 17th Street Canal levee, which sent floodwaters through hundreds of homes and into the center of the city when it broke.

The team, led by Louisiana State University civil engineering professor Ivor van

Heerden, found through sonar tests that sheet pilings at the canal went to only 10 feet below sea level.

Steve Spencer, chief engineer for Orleans Parish levees, said his agency followed the plans under Corps guidelines. He said he could not explain without further investigation the discrepancy between the 17-foot depth in the designs and the 10-foot depth found by van Heerden's team.

Independent engineers have said the levees wouldn't have been strong enough even at 17 feet, because they were built on loose, porous soil that is prone to having water seep through it. To compensate, they said, builders should have used stronger earthen material and driven steel pilings far below the 18.5-foot depth of the canal bottom.

Corps engineer Fred Young declined to speculate about the implications of van Heerden's findings.

"To me, the design drawing shows it should have been at minus 17. I don't know what (the LSU team) is doing and how they're getting minus 10," Young said. "We're looking into it."

No one has been able to look at the sheet piling that was torn out of the levee when it breached. Van Heerden said he asked to see it but was told it was buried under dirt at the construction site where the levee is being repaired and could not be dug up right away.

Several agencies are looking into possible wrongdoing in regard to levee building and maintenance. State Attorney General Charles Foti and Orleans Parish District Attorney Eddie Jordan have said they're conducting their own investigations.

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