

EIHOA Special Projects – Flood Committee report on the US Army Corps of Engineers Post Hurricane Isaac Assessment Public Meeting

The November 14th Corps's presentation on hurricane Isaac's impact primarily consisted of a presentation of study findings indicating that structures built around Lake Pontchartrain since 2005 had a negligible effect on storm surge heights. (The entire report is available at <http://www.datakik.com/eiho/Flood/FloodIssues.htm>) The audience quickly changed the focus of the presentation from hurricane Isaac to building storm surge control structures at the Rigolets and Chef Passes for the benefit of all parishes under threat of storm surge flooding.

It was encouraging to see in attendance Parish President Pat Brister, Slidell Mayor Freddy Drennan, former Slidell Mayor Sam Caruso, Senator A. G. Crowe and a representative from Senator Vitter's office. Everyone stated their strong support of storm surge structures to keep flood waters out of the lake.

During the discussion, Colonel Edward R. Fleming, commander of the Corps' New Orleans district office made some interesting statements and observations:

1. That in the 1970s the Corps proposed keeping surge from entering the lake but was stopped by a special interest lawsuit. Eventually the corps redirected their focus on protecting Orleans and Jefferson in lieu of a regional solution.
2. Col. Fleming stated that in order for the Corps to reevaluate their original plan to keep storm surge out of the lake they would need direction and funding from Congress.
... The EIHOA committee reminded Col. Fleming that Congress authorized surge structures and funding over forty years ago and that authorization has never been rescinded and the Corps redirected that funding from structures at the passes to levees along Orleans parish. Col. Fleming said he is aware of that argument and his legal department is not sure if the original authorization is still valid.
3. Col. Fleming stated that the impact to Mississippi is also a concern of that plan.
... The EIHOA committee told Col. Fleming that a Corps study had already determined the impact to Mississippi to be minimal. A member of Col. Fleming's staff in attendance at the meeting confirmed that observation.
4. Col. Fleming stated that preliminary Corps cost estimates for surge structures vary from \$4 to \$40 billion and the annual Corps budget for the entire nation is only \$5 billion per year.
... The EIHOA committee challenged the logic of the corps' estimate since the "Mr. Go" closure, gate and wall cost less than \$2 billion. Col. Fleming was asked if the BP oil spill settlement money could be used but replied that was beyond his area of influence or authority.
5. Col. Fleming stated that the Louisiana Master Plan did not recommend surge structures.
... State Senator A. G. Crowe told Col. Fleming that the Louisiana Master Plan not only recommended surge structures for the passes of Lake Pontchartrain but authorized \$75 million to study and design the structures.
6. Col. Fleming stated that Modeling is a subjective study and is subject to interpretation.
... The EIHOA committee believes this statement highlights the need for an independent review of the corps models.
7. Col. Fleming stated that it is possible that modeling for a different storm might show Corps' projects on the south shore having a greater surge impact on the north shore.
... The EIHOA committee asked the Corps to study what impact their cumulative projects since 1970 have had on a Katrina type storm that rapidly pushes built up lake surge to the east towards Eden Isles. The committee reminded the Corps that the EIHOA has been asking for this study for over five years without receiving a response.
8. Col. Fleming admitted the Corps has not studied the impact of their projects prior to 2005. They also have not evaluated the combined impact of their projects acting as one system, only as individual components.
... This is a critical omission since the Corps is responsible for the impact of all their projects including those constructed prior to 2005 and how they act collectively not individually.
9. Col. Fleming stated that the Corps is required to mitigate damages that their projects may inflict on others.
... The Corps has a policy of accepting the responsibility of correcting problems that their projects cause by constructing mitigation projects which are 100% federally funded. If damages can be proven then the control structures can be built as a mitigation project. Otherwise local beneficiaries must pay a 25% share of the cost of Corps projects.
10. The EIHOA committee believes the Corps' "Isaac study" should be expanded to show the tidal reductions that would have been realized by having control structures in place and also to perform a parallel study for hurricane Katrina.
11. Col. Fleming stated the best way to accelerate the funding of projects is to inundate your congressmen with letters & emails.