

Did Man-Made Canals Channel Katrina's Storm Surge?

Scientists, Environmentalists Say Destructive Canal System Served as a "Trojan Horse" for Floodwaters



By JAKE TAPPER and JAY LaMONICA

HOPEDALE, La., Sept. 20, 2005 -- - It's becoming a controversial question: Was there any reason why certain areas around New Orleans -- such as St. Bernard Parish -- were hit with more devastating floodwaters than others?

"That water came from that way," says oyster farmer Stacy Geraci, motioning from the rubble of what used to be his home toward the northeast. "See which way them poles are bent?" he asks. "That means it came straight from the Gulf, and from the Gulf Outlet."



(U.S. Army Corps of Engineers)

The threat that the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet -- sometimes referred to by its acronym, "Mr. Go" -- would bring floodwaters into the region during a hurricane has been a major fear in St. Bernard Parish for years. Intended to stimulate economic development by serving as a shortcut for commercial and shipping interests from the Gulf of Mexico to the Port of New Orleans, Mr. Go was chopped through the marshlands by the Army Corps of Engineers in the 1960s.

The commercial benefits have not come anywhere near projections. But now critics say it served as a backdoor for a surge of water pushed into the city by Hurricane Katrina.

"If Mr. Go did not exist, initial indications are that you would not have seen a surge tide nearly as high," says environmentalist Mike Tidwell, author of "Bayou Farewell: The Rich Life and Tragic Death of Louisiana's Cajun Coast."

Before Mr. Go and its adjacent waterways were built, Tidwell says, the storm surge would have dissipated in marshes and other wetlands that protected the city in storms past. "What Mr. Go does is, it allows the surge tide to circumvent those barriers by funneling into the watery pathway this avenue. It literally carries the surge tide into the city."

"It causes the surge to go into a narrow neck and to rise higher than it would normally be, 20 [percent] to 40 percent higher, so you are basically creating this moving narrow wall of water," says Tidwell.

Col. Richard Wagenaar, commander of the New Orleans district of the Army Corps of Engineers, disagrees with this theory. "There's a lot of people who want to blame Mr. Go for this and I'm not so sure it's to blame," Wagenaar says. "I think this water, this 20-plus surge, plus waves, would have come in here regardless of whether Mr. Go was there or not."

It remains a controversy. As first reported by The Washington Post in May, Hassan Mashriqui of the Louisiana State University Hurricane Center showed emergency planners a computer model in which the Mr. Go canal systems served as a "Trojan Horse," sneaking the storm surge into New Orleans and adjacent areas. Mashriqui now says that model ended up proving accurate.

Parish President Henry "Junior" Rodriguez, a longtime critic of Mr. Go, last year called it "a murder waiting to happen." But, surprisingly, he doesn't blame the waterway for the near-total destruction of his parish.

"I'd like to," Rodriguez told ABC News, "but this was a tidal wave. This was what you might call a perfect storm. It wasn't the 100-year storm, but this may be a 500-year storm. But there had to be a tidal wave at least 25 to 35 feet high that came through"

On Sept. 8, Congress gave the corps \$200 million to begin repairing the demolished levees. Tidwell complains that "not one penny of that money is actually being earmarked to prevent another Katrina from happening. If there is not at least \$14 billion to fully fund a plan & to close Mr. Go, to get the water of the Mississippi River back into the marshes and back toward the barrier islands, then we have utterly, utterly ridiculously dropped the ball. "

In the coming months, experts will continue to investigate whether Mr. Go and its adjacent waterways funneled a deadly surge of water into New Orleans.

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