

## **Louisiana Residents Blame Deaths on Canal They Sought to Close**

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Nov. 1 (Bloomberg) -- Trudging through knee-deep floodwater, Rodrigo Lopez approaches his single-story house in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana. He shoves open the front door and gags on the reek of toxic sludge deposited by Hurricane Katrina one month earlier. The ceiling has caved in and draped over upturned furniture. Rodrigo slices into it, revealing a layer cake of black mud, white sheetrock and bright-pink insulation. His wife, Josefina, 63, a nurse, reaches for a mud-splattered wine glass. "Baby, it's gone; just don't," says Rodrigo, 61, a worker at a fiberglass plant. "There's nothing worth taking here."

That scene was repeated over and over in late September in St. Bernard, a county east of New Orleans, as residents returned to the wreckage wrought by Katrina. St. Bernard was among the hardest-hit communities along the 150-mile (235-kilometer) stretch of the U.S. Gulf Coast that was ravaged on Aug. 29.

The hurricane killed 114 people in St. Bernard and flooded every one of its 24,000 homes. Survivors say the destruction was worsened by the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, a canal that connects New Orleans to the Gulf of Mexico by passing through St. Bernard.

Katrina pushed a 25-foot (7.6-meter) wall of water up the channel that broke through 17.5-foot-high protection levees and inundated the county.

The 76-mile-long waterway was financed by the U.S. Congress and dug by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1965. Since then, it's eroded more than 102 square miles of marsh and cypress forests and removed a natural barrier to storm surge, according to Sherwood Gagliano, a geomorphologist who has studied coastal Louisiana for 35 years. He says a square mile of marsh can absorb one foot of storm surge.

'Changed the Geometry'

"We changed the geometry of the land, and the canal became a big, open pipe to the sea," says Gagliano.

Parish leaders have long warned the federal government that the canal, which locals call the MRGO or Mr. Go, would devastate their community in a monster hurricane. The parish council has passed more than 20 resolutions over the past 15 years asking Congress and the Army Corps of Engineers to close the canal. Their pleas went unheeded.

“We knew it would happen, and it did,” says Joseph DiFatta, 49, the Republican chairman of the parish council. “There's 114 people in St. Bernard dead because of this.”

As lawmakers decide in the months ahead how to spend at least \$62 billion in federal aid to rebuild the Gulf Coast region, debate over the future of projects like the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet is already becoming contentious.

St. Bernard's leaders say they've paid a terrible price for 40 years of environmental degradation, and they are demanding that the canal be closed.

### Oyster and Shrimping Fleet

Along with the lives lost and homes destroyed, Katrina battered St. Bernard's 150-boat oyster and shrimping fleet and knocked out its biggest employer, Chalmette Refining Inc., co-owned by Exxon Mobil Corp. and Petroleos de Venezuela SA, for months.

“Big Daddy shouldn't have to pay for everything, but the federal government has a responsibility to make us whole in this,” says state Senator Walter Boasso, a Republican who represents St. Bernard. “It built the MRGO, it ruined our marshlands, it ruined our cypress swamps, and those can't be replaced, and now we're looking at 24,000 homes that have to be demolished.”

The canal's closure is by no means assured. The Port of New Orleans ships about 30 percent of its 10 million tons in cargo annually through the MRGO and the Intracoastal Waterway, a channel that intersects it.

### ‘We Have a Mission’

The rest of the port's goods are transported via the Mississippi River. Gary LaGrange, chief executive officer of the port, says faulting the MRGO for St. Bernard's devastation is an emotional response.

He doesn't accept residents' contentions that the canal aggravated the damage to the parish.

“I'm not expert enough to make that kind of judgment,” LaGrange says. “I don't blame them for how they feel, but we have a mission to get cargo to the open water of the Gulf of Mexico.”

The residents of St. Bernard, a working-class community of 70,000 with a median annual income of \$36,000, are accustomed to living with the threat of flooding. Most of the parish's residents live on a five-mile-wide thumb of land wedged between the Mississippi River and the MRGO.

“We always had hurricanes, and some part of the parish would go under, but this here is the whole thing; it's all gone, 100 percent underwater,” says Ricky Melerine, 55, the plant

manager at the local shrimp cannery owned by Bumble Bee Seafoods LP. It was wiped out.

### Thump of Furniture

Melerine, born and raised in St. Bernard, is lucky to have survived Katrina's storm surge. Riding out the hurricane with five friends in his ranch-style house, Melerine says the water swelled from inches to a chest-high flood in less than 30 minutes.

Retreating to the attic, Melerine and his friends heard the water break through the windows and the thump of furniture sloshing against the walls downstairs. Melerine chopped through the roof with a hatchet. Outside, he saw the deluge turn rooftops into islands as it engulfed his neighborhood.

“When I saw the water come up, I said, That's it, now we're in the surge that we've always feared,” says Melerine, who is one of seven members on the St. Bernard Parish Council. Melerine and his neighbors huddled together for an hour before they were rescued by a friend with a boat. The water was so deep they had to duck under stoplights as they motored to shelter.

### Sinking Streets

Throughout the parish, houses were ripped from their foundations and swept away. The streets are sinking into holes hollowed out by the torrent. One month after the storm, smashed automobiles, pickup trucks and fishing boats were still scattered in front yards and roads like misplaced toys.

Not even the dead were spared, as the flood broke open above-ground crypts at the parish cemetery and pulled caskets into the water.

“There was nothing that could have stopped the fury of this bitch,” says Henry “Junior” Rodriguez, 70, the parish president, referring to Katrina. “But the MRGO added to the destruction.”

The canal was designed by the Army Corps of Engineers to provide large vessels using the Mississippi River with a 40-mile shortcut to the Gulf of Mexico. The Corps dredges the MRGO to a depth of 36 feet to accommodate large vessels.

Lieutenant Melissa Owens, the U.S. Coast Guard's waterway chief in New Orleans, says the MRGO is open to commercial vessels at a 22-foot depth. It's up to the Corps to decide when to begin dredging again, she says. The Corps is weighing whether to resume dredging, says spokesman Jason Fanselau. The Corps is obliged to consult with the Port of New Orleans before dredging the MRGO, and not with St. Bernard Parish or the city of New Orleans, he says.

## Obsolete

The MRGO has become increasingly obsolete in the past decade because vessels have grown so large that they use the deeper, wider Mississippi River. Since 2003, only one deep-water ship a day passes through the canal, according to an economic impact report prepared by Multi-Quest International Inc., a New Orleans- based market research firm.

By comparison, more than 16 ships use the river each day on their trips to and from the Gulf.

Meanwhile, the Corps spends about \$14 million a year to dredge the channel, or about \$38,000 per deep-water vessel. “Why would you keep this open for one ship a day?” says St. Bernard Councilmember DiFatta. “At what point does a human life have value?”

Louisiana's U.S. senators, Republican David Vitter and Democrat Mary Landrieu, have committed themselves to closing the MRGO to deep-water ships. On Sept. 22, they called for a presidential commission to examine the \$40 billion allocated for Corps projects in Louisiana over the next 10 years and redirect some of the funds to mitigating the environmental damage caused by the canal.

## Army Corps of Engineers

The New Orleans shipping industry and the Army Corps of Engineers have long resisted shutting down the MRGO, says Billy Tauzin, a former Republican congressman who represented St. Bernard for 25 years. Even though the Corps agreed to carry out numerous environmental impact studies, no major action was ever taken to restore the protective wetlands around the parish.

“Mr. Go was a boon for shipping, but it's been a real net loss for the people of the area,” says Tauzin, 62, who retired from Congress last year and now represents the pharmaceutical industry. “It's a project the Corps built and designed, and they are reluctant to close it.”

Corps spokeswoman Susan Jackson says her group serves at the direction of Congress and doesn't take positions on the MRGO's future. “It's not a matter of what the Corps wants; it's up to the community and leaders at the parish, state and federal levels,” Jackson says. “The Corps is not in a position to say yes or no.”

## Maersk-Sealand

Nine companies, including Maersk-Sealand, the world's largest container vessel company and a unit of Danish shipping giant A.P. Moller Group, send cargo down the MRGO. LaGrange says that if the waterway were closed to deep-water shipping, those companies would have to send their products to the Mississippi River through the Industrial Canal, a narrow channel that separates St. Bernard from New Orleans.

The Industrial Canal is handicapped by a costly bottleneck: an 82-year-old lock that is so small it takes 10 hours to pass through it. LaGrange says the port has sought a larger, deep-water lock since 1956 that would provide an alternative to the MRGO. The project has been held up by political infighting and bureaucratic red tape, LaGrange says.

“As soon as we have an alternative for those companies to get to the river, we don't care what happens to MRGO,” he says.

In September, LaGrange lobbied members of the Senate Finance Committee, which is working on hurricane relief spending plans, to speed the construction of such a lock.

### Frozen Poultry Terminal

New Orleans Cold Storage Inc., a private company that operates the largest frozen poultry dockside terminal in the U.S., is one of those nine companies that needs the MRGO if a new lock can't be built soon.

It ships 325,000 tons of meat to Russia, Latin America and other markets annually. Katrina severely damaged the terminal, leaving more than 33 million pounds of poultry rotting in 95-degree Fahrenheit (35-degree Celsius) heat for weeks.

Mark Blanchard, the company's executive vice president, says 325 workers load ships and run the warehouse. He plans to reopen the plant in early 2006.

“Closing the MRGO would kill the jobs we create, and jobs are critical to New Orleans right now,” Blanchard says. “I am sympathetic with St. Bernard's plight, but for them the MRGO is the monster that created the problem; they can blame everything on it.”

### 49-Year Project

Donald “Boyse” Bollinger, CEO of Bollinger Shipyards Inc., also depends on the MRGO. The company's dry-dock complex, which repairs barges and ships, employs 300 workers; three of its five dry docks are ruined.

A new deep-water lock would satisfy Bollinger, yet he's reluctant to stake his company's future on a project that's been in the works for 49 years. “The location is critically important because of MRGO,” says Bollinger, whose company is based in Lockport, Louisiana. “The shipyard has no value if we don't have it or the lock.”

As lawmakers weigh the canal's future, the people of St. Bernard are struggling with the desolation left by the storm. Many returned to their homes for the first time on Sept. 26.

In Meraux, a neighborhood adjacent to a refinery operated by Murphy Oil Corp., houses were choked with six inches of ink-black mud and clumps of swamp grass. The refinery has pledged to clean up a spill of 1 million gallons (3.8 million liters) of crude oil caused by Katrina.

## 'We Heard They'd Drowned'

Ron Hingle, shirtless in the heat, said he lost his mother, Dorothy, 83, and stepbrother Russell Embry, 56, in the flood. He said Russell was disabled and couldn't evacuate with Ron and his wife, Laura.

"They were supposed to be picked up," he said, rubbing his face. Earlier that day, they were happily surprised to see their neighbors slogging through their house. "We heard they'd drowned," Hingle said.

A block from the Hingles, Ed and Marilyn Godlewski retrieved dozens of family photo albums and laid the pictures out on their car and the ground to dry. Marilyn, 50, a mother of three grown sons, was defiantly cheerful as she unearthed the images of her family's life.

"This is me with my sons at the World's Fair in New Orleans in 1984," she said, pointing at some photos. "This was our wedding." The emulsion on many of the photos had liquefied into a kaleidoscopic swirl.

The St. Bernard government center and its courthouse were flooded. So Junior Rodriguez and the council retreated to the driest place in the area: Chalmette Refining, which sits on high ground.

## Heart Attack

For weeks after the storm, the council met in a conference room in the refinery building. Telephone jacks connected to a satellite dish on the roof hung from the ceiling like vines, and a to-do list tacked to the wall included tasks like mosquito control and boat removal from roadways.

U.S. Army pilots ducked in to offer council members helicopter flyovers of the parish. Down the hall, nurses from the Department of Homeland Security offered tetanus and hepatitis vaccinations.

On Sept. 26, the day the parish reopened to residents, the council was meeting when a pickup truck peeled into the parking lot. A man prone in the truck's bed was suffering a heart attack, and paramedics tried to resuscitate him, to no avail.

The victim, an elderly volunteer at the shelter for storm evacuees at the local high school, died on the gurney in the ad hoc emergency center. As a doctor and nurse decided which room to convert into a temporary morgue, the council members took a moment, bowed their heads and said the Lord's Prayer.

## Andrew Jackson's Victory

“I expect there will be a lot more like that,” said Evelyn Rodriguez, Junior's wife. “This is too much for a lot of the older folk to bear.”

St. Bernard was founded by French aristocrats and Spanish Islenos from the Canary Islands in the late 1700s. It was the site of Andrew Jackson's victory over the British in the Battle of New Orleans in 1815.

In the Great Flood of 1927, when the Mississippi River jumped its banks, engineers dynamited St. Bernard's levees to save New Orleans by turning the parish into an emergency spillway.

The episode remains such a bitter memory for St. Bernard residents that some said they heard explosions when Katrina hit the parish.

Out at the hurricane protection levee that separates the MRGO from St. Bernard's inner harbor, it's evident such rumors are unfounded. A barge rests on top of the 17.5-foot barrier, next to a steel gate that permits fishing boats and other vessels to access the channel. On the other side of the gate, water flows through a gaping hole, 50 feet wide, in the levee.

## Bite Marks

Ricky Melerine says the barge slammed through the levee and then got stuck on the wall when the floodwaters receded. Farther down the MRGO toward the Gulf, the levee has huge chunks taken out of it, like bite marks. “That's where it was coming over,” says Melerine, shaking his head.

Originally dug at a width of 500 feet, the MRGO has broadened to more than a half mile as ship wakes eat away at the mud banks. The ocean's tidal flow also erodes the sides as it moves up and down the canal.

Barren cypress groves, killed off by the salt water that pours into the marshland through the canal, stand in the distance. Dolphins jump the wakes of ships 75 miles inland.

Local fishermen moved their boats inside the protection levee to St. Bernard's inner harbor before Katrina made landfall, as they do before every major storm.

## Uninsured Boat

Troy Guerra, 33, a third-generation shrimper and oysterman, had invested \$100,000 in his 35-foot fishing boat, El Pescador. Guerra, who typically earns \$1,000 for a four-day shrimp catch and \$500 per day for oysters, says he didn't insure the boat because the premiums are too high.

After Katrina's 25-foot surge penetrated the levee, it pulverized the harbor's wharves and dry docks. The harbor is a graveyard of ships that were moved there for protection, with the hulls of tugboats and other vessels protruding from the still water.

El Pescador capsized, and its future looks bleak. Guerra righted it and patched its bottom with plywood, which won't hold for long. "Everything you work for, it just gets knocked down, and you have to start over," says Guerra, who has a sunbaked face and oversized forearms from pulling shrimp nets.

He plans to rejoin his wife, Kendal, in Texas City, Texas, near Galveston. The couple is expecting a daughter, their first child, in November.

### Open Triangle

Restoring the wetlands claimed by the MRGO is essential to protecting St. Bernard as well as New Orleans, says Hassan Mashriqui, a hydraulic engineer and assistant professor at the Hurricane Center at Louisiana State University. In 2004, Mashriqui warned federal, state and local officials that eastern New Orleans could suffer massive flooding through the canal network east of the city.

The MRGO and the Intracoastal Waterway form an open triangle more than 500 square miles in size between New Orleans and the sea. The channels intersect in St. Bernard and then connect with the Industrial Canal in New Orleans. Once filled with swampland, this triangular area is now a virtual extension of the Gulf of Mexico.

When a hurricane strikes, the area acts like a massive funnel, says Mashriqui. As storm surge barrels westward from the Gulf, its volume and force are concentrated between the MRGO on one side and the Intracoastal Waterway on the other.

### The Funnel's Spout

The water then rushes into the Industrial Canal, the funnel's spout, and the city.

During Katrina, the Industrial Canal's levees broke in several places, flooding New Orleans's Lower Ninth Ward district and part of St. Bernard. "If you didn't have the MRGO, you would have had some relief," says Mashriqui.

Before Katrina struck in August, geomorphologist Gagliano unveiled a \$1 billion plan that would protect St. Bernard and New Orleans from a catastrophic storm surge. He recommends building a levee 80 feet thick across the MRGO about halfway down its course to the Gulf.

This used to be the site of a natural ridge that the Army Corps of Engineers cut through when it dug the MRGO. The new levee, a giant speed bump for storm surge, would feature a gate for small vessels.

A concrete wall 19 miles long and 30 feet high would also be erected north of the MRGO. And fresh water from the Mississippi River would be diverted to deposit silt into the canal, which would help reestablish the wetlands.

‘The Soft Underbelly’

“This area is the soft underbelly of the greater New Orleans area, and if we can't produce better perimeter protection, then what we're really telling people is that if they come back, they are taking their chances when the next hurricane comes,” says Gagliano, president of Coastal Environments Inc., a Baton Rouge, Louisiana-based consulting firm that advises companies and local governments on environmental issues.

The St. Bernard Parish Council endorsed Gagliano's plan before Katrina hit, and local leaders are demanding that Congress move quickly to close the canal.

“I think we got a shot now better than we ever had before,” says state Senator Boasso.

Still, as residents confront the staggering task of reconstructing their community, many are succumbing to despair. In Arabi, the neighborhood across from the port where Josefina and Rodrigo Lopez lived, houses will have to be bulldozed and new zoning and building codes will have to be weighed as city planners decide how to rebuild.

Passports and Bank Records

These considerations no longer interest the Lopezes; they're moving to Houston. Rodrigo had returned simply to get his family's personal papers. He broke the bedroom window with a stick and climbed in, retrieving a lockbox containing passports and bank records along with a piggy bank filled with quarters.

Parish Councilman Mark Madary, who represents Arabi, was standing at the edge of the floodwater as the Lopezes waded back to their truck. “I'm sorry about this,” he said to them. As he watched the Lopezes drive away, he said, “I'm afraid so many people are so distraught and overwhelmed that they're not going to want to live here anymore.”

That may be Katrina's ultimate legacy. For four decades, the people of St. Bernard foresaw their doom in the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet canal. Now that their worst fears have become reality, the canal may finally become a thing of the past. Yet the hurricane has also forced the parish to face the prospect that it, too, may become a memory.