



Everything New Orleans

MR-GO storm surge barrier questioned

By Matthew Brown
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From engineers to environmentalists, shipping interests to politicians, almost everyone involved in the fight over the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet agrees the shipping channel needs to be closed after it exacerbated Hurricane Katrina's catastrophic flooding.

But more than four decades since the 76-mile waterway first stirred controversy, the definition of "closed" remains elusive, hobbling agreement on the channel known as "Mister Go" even as its potential for destruction has been laid bare.

St. Bernard Parish President Henry "Junior" Rodriguez signed onto a "closure plan" with the Port of New Orleans this month that calls for reducing the depth of the 36-foot deep channel by eight feet, installing a storm gate near its eastern end and building a 23-foot high surge wall across Lake Borgne.

The St. Bernard Parish Council blasted the plan as inadequate and asked for a halt to all dredging.

Now an LSU engineering professor and a local environmental group have joined those questioning the plan. They say construction of the storm surge barrier would be impractical, while a shallower shipping channel would perpetuate the environmental problems that contributed to catastrophic flooding in St. Bernard Parish, the Lower 9th Ward and eastern New Orleans.

"Theoretically, it's not impossible," LSU engineering professor Hassan Mashriqui said of the proposed surge barrier. "You're trying to build a huge barrier in the middle of a lake. It would be hugely expensive ... You can draw anything on the map, but it has to come from some logic. It would be a very hard sell, if not dead on arrival."

Mashriqui developed computer models that show the MR-GO and a second waterway, the Intracoastal Canal, funneled Katrina's surge into the Industrial Canal and greatly increased its velocity, knocking down several levees protecting New Orleans and St. Bernard and leading to hundreds of deaths.

More logical than a storm surge barrier across Lake Borgne, he said, would be to close that funnel with gates such as Rodriguez advocates and build a strengthened levee along Lake Borgne's western shoreline.

Carlton Dufrechou with the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation added that a shallower, 28-foot MR-GO would continue to destroy surrounding wetlands. Those marshes once served as buffers against storm surges. Maintaining the channel, he said, would allow its soft-mud banks to slough off, further eroding local marshlands.

The designer of Rodriguez's agreement with the Port of New Orleans, Sherwood Gagliano of Baton Rouge-based Coastal Environments, Inc., disputes criticisms of the plan.

He said the envisioned surge barrier could be built much faster than the new levees Mashriqui favors. They also would provide shelter for marsh creation projects so the wetlands buffer could be restored.

"I think what I proposed will work very well and it's a comprehensive plan that includes both flood protection and environmental management," Gagliano said. "We knew about the threat, and we had an approach to reduce that threat that we had been working on with St. Bernard Parish residents over a number of years. We didn't just say, 'Gee, we had a storm, let's build a surge barrier.'"

The Army Corps of Engineers, which built and maintains the MR-GO, said this week it has agreed to stop dredging through September, 2006, while the channel's future is settled.

For St. Bernard Council Chairman Joey DiFatta that marks the first step toward what he hopes will be the end for the MR-GO. "The best thing we can do is just to make it go away, fill it with dirt," he said.

But Rodriguez said that would sacrifice his battered parish's chance for an economic resurgence, by taking away future opportunities to develop maritime industries along the MR-GO.

"Certainly MR-GO was the main cause of our flooding, not only because it brought the water up but also because it killed our major buffer zone, our cypress trees and our hardwoods," he said. "A gate would eliminate that storm surge coming up MR-GO. If you're in a room and have a 100 people in that room and let them out one person at a time, they're not going to all get out at once. That's how the gate would work."

Rodriguez said that the agreement with the Port of New Orleans, which advocates for shipping firms that use the channel, was designed to stir economic development along with ensuring flood protection.

"We don't have anything left on the riverfront. That Gulf Outlet, if it's protected and it's controlled properly, there's some maritime interest that would locate back there that would enhance St. Bernard's revenues," he said.

Politically, support is split for Rodriguez's compromise with the port.

Still behind him among the region's congressional delegation are U.S. Rep. William Jefferson, D-New Orleans and U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-LA. Spokespersons for Jefferson and Landrieu said they favored a flood protection scheme that takes into account the Port Authority's shipping needs.

But U.S. Rep. Charlie Melancon, D-Napoleonville, has backed off previous support for Rodriguez until the parish President hashed out his differences with the Parish Council. The office of U.S. Sen. David Vitter, R-LA, did not respond to several requests for comment.

Meanwhile, the Army Corps of Engineers is drafting its own set of plans for a Category 5 protection levee along the west shore of Lake Borgne, part of a metro-wide system that has a preliminary price tag of \$7 billion to \$10 billion.

Like Rodriguez's plan, the Corps' concept calls for surge-stopping control gates along the MR-GO and Intracoastal Canal, although the MR-GO gate would be at Bayou Dupre, not Bayou la Loutre as in the Rodriguez plan.

Al Naomi, engineer for the Corps' New Orleans district, said the gates would be needed even if dredging of the MR-GO ceases permanently.

"An important thing to remember about the MRGO is that whether it is there or not, St. Bernard is extremely vulnerable to a storm surge," Naomi said. "The water that builds up across Lake Borgne is going to attack their levee systems. When you have a major storm surge, there is nothing between those levees and Cuba except open water."

On Saturday, President Bush signed legislation giving the Corps six months - until May 19, 2006 - to complete its preliminary analysis for regional protection, including cost estimates. A final report is due in 24 months, Nov. 19, 2007.

Rodriguez said whether his plan makes it into that report is largely out of his hands.

"In the final analysis, they (the Corps) are going to do what they want. Since when has the Corps listened to anybody?" he asked.

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