



Everything New Orleans

The Times-Picayune

Katrina may mean MR-GO has to go

Channel made storm surge worse, critics say

Monday, October 24, 2005

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Decades of debate failed to answer whether a little-used shipping channel east of the city would invite disaster during a major hurricane. Katrina may have settled the argument.

After massive flooding killed hundreds in St. Bernard Parish, eastern New Orleans and the Lower 9th Ward, there is growing consensus that Katrina's surge was made far worse by the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet, a 76-mile shortcut between the city and the Gulf of Mexico. And while the shipping industry vows to protect the channel, political momentum appears increasingly in favor of St. Bernard officials who have long warned the waterway must be closed.

Scientists from Louisiana State University's Hurricane Center say the Gulf Outlet, also known as MR-GO, and a second channel, the Intracoastal Waterway, funneled Katrina's powerful surge into a narrow bottleneck just north of Chalmette.

The funnel caused floodwaters to stack up several feet higher than elsewhere in the metro area and sharply increased the surge's speed as it rushed through the MR-GO and into the Industrial Canal. As a result, levees that would have been topped -- but not breached -- crumbled under the hydrologic assault, turning a major flood into an unprecedented disaster, according to Hassan Mashriqui, a civil engineer from LSU who had predicted the funnel effect prior to the storm.

Absent the funnel effect, Mashriqui said, "you would have had maybe 2 to 3 feet of flooding at the max, but not everybody's house underwater. It's still flooding, but one is significant and one is catastrophic."

Levee claims disputed

The Port of New Orleans and Army Corps of Engineers dispute the Hurricane Center's claims, saying Katrina's intensity was enough to topple levees regardless of the shipping channel. Those levees were built to withstand only storms up to Category 3; Katrina made landfall at Buras as a Category 4 storm.

"This was just a ferocious and huge storm," Port of New Orleans CEO Gary LaGrange said.

The corps's investment in the 40-year-old project is substantial: an average of \$16.1 million a year since 1985 in dredging and maintenance costs, for a total of \$322 million in the past two decades alone, said Greg Breerwood, deputy engineer for the corps's New Orleans district.

But as St. Bernard Parish officials made the rounds in Washington, D.C., last week to step up pressure against the Gulf Outlet, several members of Louisiana's congressional delegation said

Katrina offered all the proof needed.

"MR-GO clearly serves as a hurricane highway. It clearly did serve as a conduit for the storm surge after Katrina," said U.S. Sen. David Vitter, R-Metairie. "MR-GO has to go. That's even clearer now than it was before."

Originally billed as an economic boon to New Orleans and St. Bernard, the shipping channel stirred opposition even before its 1965 opening. A 1958 U.S. Department of Interior report warned of "major ecological change with widespread ecological consequences" if the channel were dredged, according to a history of the project compiled by Rex Caffey and Brian LeBlanc of the LSU AgCenter.

But the promise of economic opportunity posed by a new shortcut from New Orleans to the Gulf proved more attractive than abstract warnings about damage to adjacent marshlands. Construction began the same year as the Department of Interior report and was completed in 1965 for \$92 million.

As soon as the channel was dug, saltwater from the Gulf swept into and eventually killed thousands of acres of fresh and brackish marshland. The short-term casualties of that environmental shift included St. Bernard's thriving fur-industry, which had been centered in the muskrat-rich marshes around the parish, and oyster farmers whose reefs died off in the higher-salinity water.

The long-term effects stretched far beyond those resource-based industries. An estimated 20,000 acres of marsh that served as a buffer against storms were swept away over the next 40 years. Caffey and LeBlanc estimated the cost of losing that acreage at \$200 to \$350 million, primarily through losses to the commercial and recreational fishing industries.

Domino effect

Meanwhile, economic benefits from the shipping channel have fallen short of initial expectations. Traffic along the MR-GO averages about one vessel per day -- equal to about 15 percent of the Port of New Orleans total traffic, LaGrange said.

Yet for several maritime companies along the Industrial Canal, including Bollinger Gulf Repairs, New Orleans Coal Storage and Lockheed Martin's Michoud plant, the MR-GO offers the sole outlet for ships too large for an alternative route through locks leading to the Mississippi River.

If the MR-GO closes without an alternative route opening first, Bollinger Vice President Robert Socha said the repair dock's 300 jobs could go, too.

"If one or the other isn't met, Bollinger Gulf Repair would probably cease to exist," he said.

Nevertheless, with Katrina's damage so glaring, St. Bernard officials are encountering widespread sympathy in arguing people's lives should trump economics.

U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-New Orleans issued a statement in support of the parish's efforts and said she would "work with (Parish President Junior Rodriguez) every step of the way."

U.S. Rep. Charlie Melancon, D-Napoleonville, said he will introduce a bill to keep the channel operational but also install a pair of steel storm gates that would be kept closed except when ships were passing. Melancon said the gates and a proposed storm levee spanning either side of the shipping channel near Hopedale would cost \$180 million.

LaGrange said the port would drop its commitment to the MR-GO once a larger set of locks under construction by the corps at the south end of the Industrial Canal are completed. Corps officials last year forecast a 2017 completion date for the \$650 million locks.

Unwilling to wait

But St. Bernard Parish Councilman Craig Taffaro said his parish cannot wait that long.

"Congress needs to understand the people of St. Bernard lost everything, including loved ones, due to the negligence and lack of responsiveness by the federal government and Army Corps of Engineers in the maintenance of that structure," Taffaro said.

But the port has an ally in U.S. Rep. William Jefferson, D-New Orleans. In a statement issued last week, Jefferson signaled his support for keeping MR-GO open until the locks are completed.

"I will continue working with the Port of New Orleans and other interested parties so that New Orleans does not lose valuable business at the port," the statement said. "In the interim, I will also seek funding for the Inner Harbor Navigational Canal lock, which will allow us to close MRGO to commercial traffic."

Jefferson spokeswoman Nicole Venable said the congressman also wanted a floodgate system such as Melancon described. But she warned "not to cut off the (Gulf Outlet) altogether in the face of irrational fears."

That description of concerns about the waterway as "irrational" embodied what Taffaro described as his biggest worry about its fate.

"We have people in Washington making decisions who have not even begun to understand or comprehend the destruction that has taken place in our parish," he said.

Ironically, Katrina's devastation also included damage to the shipping channel that could become a first step in its closing. Sediments dumped by the storm reduced the waterway's depth to 23 feet in some areas, 13 feet shallower than the pre-storm minimum.

Breerwood, the Army Corps's engineer, said initial plans to dredge the waterway -- an action aggressively sought by the Port of New Orleans -- are on hold pending a review of waterways and levee systems across coastal Louisiana.

LSU's Caffey said if dredging resumes anytime soon, it will offer a strong indication of the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet's future.

"That's going to reveal what their hand is in this," he said. "If they start dredging again, that tells us where this is going."

Manuel Torres contributed to this story.