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Louisiana group studies levee failure Team hopes to speak with nearby residents

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By Mark Schleifstein

Staff writer

Louisiana is fielding its own team of engineers and research scientists to conduct an investigation into levee failures that flooded New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina hit, the state Department of Transportation and Development announced Tuesday.

The team will be led by Ivor van Heerden, an associate professor of civil and environmental engineering at LSU who questioned initial Army Corps of Engineers statements that the 17th Street and London Avenue canal breaches were caused by water topping the levee walls.

Van Heerden's theory that the pressure of floodwaters within the canals somehow caused the walls to buckle has gained credence over the past two weeks as three other forensic investigative teams sponsored by the Army Corps of Engineers, American Society of Civil Engineers and National Science Foundation have inspected the breaks and other stretches of levees surrounding the New Orleans area.

Van Heerden said none of the other teams include Louisiana representatives and that the new team will help ensure that the state's interests are represented during the levee break investigation.

"That takes into account that probably 100,000 homes have been lost to flooding and more than a thousand citizens have lost their lives," he said.

Van Heerden said his group already has been contacted by a number of people living near the failed walls who are providing details about what they saw and heard during and after the storm. He said he's also searching for people living near the levee walls who have clocks that were stopped by floodwaters, which he said would help determine when the levees failed.

The team is asking the corps for a variety of documents, including preconstruction and as-built plans; construction contracts; inspection reports; and correspondence concerning the Pittman Construction Co., which documents show built the 17th Street Canal levee wall.

The group also will use computer models to re-create the way storm surge may have caused the walls to fail. Van Heerden and fellow team member Hassan Mashriqui of the LSU Hurricane Center provided storm surge modeling results to state and federal emergency planners in advance of the storm that showed water would top levees in St. Bernard Parish, eastern New Orleans, parts of the Lower 9th Ward and parts of St. Charles and Jefferson parishes. Van Heerden's prestorm models did not show water topping the 17th Street and London Avenue canals.

Joining van Heerden on the state team will be:

- Radhey S. Sharma, associate professor in geotechnical and geo-environmental engineering at LSU.
- G. Paul Kemp, director of the LSU Natural Systems Modeling Group and associate professor in the LSU School of the Coast and Environment.
- Hassan Mashriqui, assistant professor of research, LSU Hurricane Center.
- Wes Shrum, director of graduate students, LSU sociology department.
- S. Ahmet Binselam, manager of the New Orleans Geographic Information Systems, LSU Center for the Study of Public Health Impacts of Hurricanes.
- Three independent engineers to be hired by the transportation department.

People who live near the levee walls and have clocks that were stopped by floodwaters or have other information about the levee failures are asked to call the team at (225)578-0268.

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