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Katrina & Recovery
Feds Propose Massive Buyout for Mississippi Coast

by Kathy Lohr

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Kathy Lohr, NPR

This property, like many bare foundations that remain along Beach Boulevard in Bay St. Louis, Miss., could be included in the proposed buyout along the Mississippi coast.

Morning Edition, November 15, 2007 · The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is proposing a federal buyout of 17,000 properties along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Many homes and businesses on the land were destroyed when Hurricane Katrina came ashore in 2005. The proposal would be the largest federal buyout ever in the United States.

Residents who have been trying to rebuild over the past two years oppose the idea because they believe the corps' strategy would mean the end of some small Mississippi communities.

Driving along the Mississippi coastline on Highway 90 between Pascagoula and Bay St. Louis — a span of some 70 miles — the rebuilding is evident. The sprawling casinos are back. So are hotels. High rise condos are going up. Even some of the magnificent homes along the shoreline are appearing once again.

Jim Thriffiley, president of the Bay St. Louis, Miss., City Council, is thrilled with the progress along Main Street, which is several blocks from the water.

But right along the shoreline, there's a patchwork of new construction and lots of open, vacant space.

"This lot here had a million-dollar home on it," Thriffiley said. "It disappeared."

Another five homes just up the coastline were washed away in the storm, along with hundreds of others.

'Terrible Crunch'

Bay St. Louis was one of the Mississippi coastal towns hit hardest by Katrina and the 30-foot storm surge that followed. It has taken time and encouragement to coax folks to move back.

Thriffiley said news of a possible buyout has already caused some people to delay rebuilding.

In the long run, it will ruin the town's economy, he said. Everyone who lives in the community contributes to the area. But if people begin to leave, the city still has to maintain the roads and water lines — with fewer people using them, Thriffiley said.

"Then the unit price of providing the services skyrockets and goes through the roof," Thriffiley said. "At that point, you got a terrible crunch on everybody else."

Thriffiley and others along the coast say the Corps of Engineers' proposal to buy out 17,000 properties is a mistake. They say government is basing the idea on the worst storm that ever hit this area. But they say that's not likely to happen again.

Moving People Out

Susan Rees, head of the Army Corps of Engineers' Mississippi Coastal Improvement Program, said the buyout is not an overreaction.

Rees said hurricanes happen repeatedly in this area. But storms that date back to the 1800s were not as traumatic or damaging.

"There weren't so many people here and there weren't so many things here to be destroyed," according to Rees.

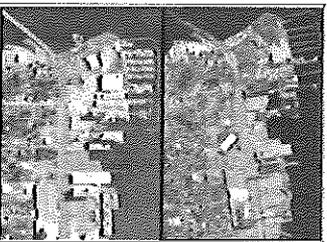
Coastal redevelopment must be well-planned, or else damage caused by the next storm could be worse than Katrina, Rees said.

The corps is doing a comprehensive two-year study to determine what can be done to reduce the effects of another hurricane along the Mississippi coast. There are plenty of structural options,



Kathy Lohr, NPR

Alice Chambers owns the Mockingbird Café on Second Street in the old town area of Bay St. Louis, Miss. She and her husband returned to the area and opened the coffee shop about a year after Hurricane Katrina hit. Chambers says it may be too late for a buyout because so many people have been reinvesting and rebuilding along the Gulf Coast.



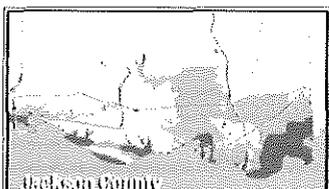
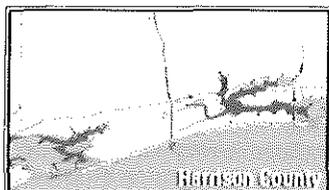
Side-by-side satellite images show Biloxi, Miss., before and after Hurricane Katrina blew ashore in 2005. The first photo (left) was taken on April 12, 2005, the second (right) on Aug. 31, 2005. Courtesy Army Corps of Engineers

Mississippi Buyout Areas

The buyout proposed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers along the Mississippi coast would be the largest federal buyout ever in the United States.

In the set of maps below, the potential buyout areas (in blue) are below the flood zone. The buyout covers three counties: Hancock, Harrison and Jackson. The Army Corps of Engineers has determined that it is not practical to elevate structures in these areas to 15 feet above ground level to clear the flood zone.

The green areas represent flood-proof areas and would not be included in the buyout because the land is high enough to be considered at low risk of flooding.



including shoring up barrier islands, building sea walls, levees or flood gates and adding sand to existing beaches.

But most people are focused on the non-structural option: moving people out of the area.

"It's a voluntary program. It's a long-term program," said Bill Walker, head of the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources.

'You've Got to Start Someplace'

Walker said a buyout will take 10 to 20 years. The government wants to reach those who need assistance without disturbing people who are not interested, he said.

Even though officials stress the plan is voluntary, some residents worry that if they refuse an offer, they won't be able to afford to stay because their federal flood insurance will escalate. Others say the corps and FEMA have to find a way to work better with residents and local governments to earn their trust and support.

At a recent meeting in Gulfport, Miss., Rees displayed a map showing potential buyout areas of Harrison County. It includes properties along the beach and in low-lying inland areas.

After the meeting, Joseph Smith said he's in favor of the buyout. His home flooded several times before it was destroyed by Katrina.

"We didn't see no use in building back," he said. "Every time we get a good rain, it floods over. And when Katrina came, it went all the way up to the roof of the house."

The buyout and other corps ideas could cost as much as \$40 billion.

Oliver Houck, an environmental law professor at Tulane University, said it's worth it. "You've got to start someplace," Houck said.

This kind of buyout plan has never been attempted and Houck said the idea is long overdue.

If people stay where they are, they'll get hit again, he said. And the only real answer is reallocating money from the federal flood-insurance program and other flood-mitigation projects to this plan. That would give people an option to sell their property and provide a natural buffer zone in the future.

"Subsidizing development in the hit zone only encourages more hits and more hit losses," Houck said. So it would be better to put that federal money into the buyout offers, he said.

Checkerboard Effect

Back in Bay St. Louis, Alicein Chambers attaches snowflake decorations to the ceiling of the Mockingbird Café. The coffee shop is located in a historic building that made it through Katrina. It's been open for about a year now.

Chambers says too much time has passed and too many people have spent their energy rebuilding to accept a buyout now.

"Before the process began, they should have been here marking it off [by] saying, 'This we need to take back to protect you,'" Chambers says.

She says more people would have taken a buyout offer back then — "not after the fact, not after you come back with all that you have."

Many say the buyout will create a checkerboard effect, leaving a patchwork of neighborhoods with pockets of activity next to places that contain bare foundations and broken trees. They say that's not good for communities trying hard to make a comeback.

The Corps of Engineers plans to present its proposals to Congress next month.

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