

In the furor of the political debates over immigration, intelligence leaks and the war in Iraq, a very important bill is being debated in relative quietness in Congress. The goal of this bill, sponsored by Russ Feingold and John McCain and entitled the Water Resources Planning and Modernization Act of 2006 (S.2288), is to refine and modernize the US Army Corps of Engineers. Behind this commendable effort is the partial destruction of the city of New Orleans - the greatest engineering disaster in our history - due in significant part, to the misplaced priorities and outright incompetence of the Corps.

In March 2006 the Government Accounting Office (GAO) provided testimony before the Senate Subcommittee on Energy and Resources that revealed a number of major shortcomings in the Corps' approach to project planning and management. Specific examples of Corps inadequacies presented by the GAO include:

- Annual project benefits for deepening the Delaware River to improve ship traffic would be, "about \$13.3 million/year compared to the \$40.1 million claimed by the Corps."
- In an analysis of the Oregon Inlet Jetty project along the Outer Banks of North Carolina, "the benefits claimed by the Corps would have been reduced by about 90%," if real world trawler numbers were used.
- In the Sacramento River flood protection project, the Corps, "incorrectly counted the number of properties protected by 20%, and incorrectly valued" these properties.

The Corps' vast overestimation of project benefits has been responsible for some spectacular pork barrel projects, including the Tennessee Tombigbee Waterway – a two billion dollar shipping canal in Alabama/Mississippi - and the \$100 million Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO) - a rock-lined canal that leads from New Orleans to the open Gulf. Both canals are seldom used.

The MRGO channel provides a view of another aspect of the Corps' operations. Levee failure along the canal where it intersects with the City of New Orleans was due to enhanced Katrina storm surge exacerbated by the canal. Critics of the Corps predicted this hazard before the MRGO canal was even constructed. But, as so often happens, the Corps ignored the criticism. In our own interaction with the Corps, we have commented on problems related to a number of beach nourishment and other coastal engineering projects, almost entirely to no avail. Even after the fact, the Corps typically proclaims its innocence as it has with regard to responsibility for the failed New Orleans levees.

The final straw or tipping point that has lead to support for the Corps Reform Bill is the levee failures, a potential hazard recognized for more than 40 years. Most of the flooding resulted from levee and canal margin failures rather than overtopping.

Over the last 5 years, the Corps spent \$1.9 billion in Louisiana (more than in any other state). Even though it was widely recognized during that time that the levees were highly vulnerable to a storm, they remained untouched. What higher priority could there be for the state of Louisiana, and perhaps the nation, than the protection of a major city by its levees?

What this illustrates, besides a lack of engineering competence, is the fact that the Corps is driven by political rather than national priorities. Unlike most other government agencies, the Corps is funded on a project-by-project basis. Without projects, the Corps can't survive. Congress deliberately set the Corps up this way to assure that Congressional priorities, often in the pork barrel category, would drive the agency.

Unfortunately, the priorities of the American people, including the preservation of New Orleans, took a back seat to the whims of Louisiana politicians who supported projects. In this sense, the Louisiana congressional delegation and other politicians must share the blame. But it is inexcusable that the nation's engineering agency failed to shout from the rooftops that the levees had to be fixed.

The Feingold-McCain bill will provide independent, outside oversight on Corps projects, assure improved cost/benefit analyses for future projects and steer the agency towards societal rather than political priorities.

The Water Resources Planning and Modernization Act is long overdue, and will be a major step forward in protecting our cities and preserving our natural environments for future generations.

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