

Corps to offer 'relocation'

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Hurricane Katrina struck the Mississippi Gulf Coast on Aug. 29, 2005, yet today the Federal Emergency Management Agency says 2,364 families are still living in trailers, mobile homes and hotel rooms.

At the direction of Congress, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has conducted a comprehensive two-year study to determine what can be done to reduce the effects of another hurricane along the Mississippi coast. The result of that massive study is called the Mississippi Coastal Improvement Plan.

In 2007, the Corps stunned a gathering of homeowners in Bay St. Louis by announcing that up to 17,000 properties could be bought by the federal government and converted into wetlands or other public uses as part of an ambitious coastal protection program.

Gulf Coast residents struggling to recover and rebuild from Katrina worried that the Corps proposal might stymie the future of many Coast communities. Business leaders and elected officials expressed strong concern that large-scale buyouts could harm rebuilding efforts, drain tax revenues and strain municipal resources.

But in early 2008, a Corps official said buying out around 3,000 homes over five years was a more "realistic" proposal for the Corps to present to Congress. When the draft report was finally released last month, the number of proposed buyouts had dropped to approximately 2,000 properties in Hancock, Harrison and Jackson counties.

The Corps has determined that it is not practical to elevate structures in these areas to 15 feet above ground level to clear the storm surge flood zone.

Yet even on that scale, the buyout proposed by the Corps along the Mississippi coast would be the largest federal buyout ever in the U.S.

In Perspective today, Rob Young, director of the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines at Western Carolina University, argues that the Corps is "pursuing a policy that may not be popular with the Mississippi congressional delegation, but one that should be embraced by the majority of concerned American taxpayers."

In support of his argument, Young said that a proposal to "restore" the undeveloped barrier islands of the Gulf Islands National Seashore would cost an estimated \$477 million while the benefits to the mainland shoreline are estimated at only \$17.6 million per year in possible storm damage reduction.

Young said the buyouts - or "relocations" - would cost an estimated \$187 million to \$397 million, while the benefits are significantly larger at \$22 million to \$33 million per year in terms of possible storm damage reduction.

But asking Gulf Coast storm survivors who have fought so long and so hard to rebuild their lives and communities to take buyouts and relocate may prove a hard sell. The state's congressional delegation should take a hard look at the MCIP draft report.

Readers interested in seeing it for themselves can visit www.ms Cip. usace.army.mil/.

Additional Facts

Is it viable?

- The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' draft proposal of its Mississippi Coastal Improvement Plan will have a great influence on the future of the Mississippi Gulf Coast as it continues to move forward with redevelopment in the wake of the cataclysmic damage inflicted on Harrison, Hancock and Jackson counties by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The draft proposal is offering property "buyouts" for highly vulnerable properties