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\$2.5 Billion More for Levees Also Proposed

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The Bush administration proposed spending an additional \$2.5 billion for New Orleans levee construction yesterday as it issued long-awaited construction guidelines for the flood-prone region that would require rebuilding many heavily damaged houses at least three feet above ground.

With tens of thousands of houses awaiting reconstruction, the move could resolve an impasse over how to rebuild the low-lying metropolis. Uncertainty over the levees has left homeowners unsure about whether to rebuild and about how high houses should stand to avoid future flooding. Yesterday's announcement is an

attempt to lay to rest some of the fears that have stalled the recovery. The \$2.5 billion proposal, combined with previous efforts, would protect 98 percent of the population in the four-parish region with levees strong enough to meet flood insurance standards, officials said, and would protect them against the extreme event known as the "100-year flood."

Given that level of levee protection, the federal flood guidelines issued yesterday generally require that houses be rebuilt at least three feet above ground. Many older houses in low-lying areas could have to be rebuilt even higher, officials said.

The proposal also extinguishes anxieties over whether flood rules

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might bar from reconstruction some of the city's poorest low-lying neighborhoods, such as the Lower Ninth Ward. Many officials had feared that some areas of New Orleans would have to be all but abandoned, but now the entire city will be protected.

This "brings certainty to some uncertain issues along the greater New Orleans area," said Donald E. Powell, the federal rebuilding coordinator. For a resident, he said, "I think it brings certainty so I can get on with my life to rebuild my home the way that I want it."

The new building guidelines do not apply to existing houses, those that suffered less than 50 percent damage or homeowners who obtain permits before the rules take effect locally. But many homeowners and investors have been waiting for the federal guidelines as a signal about the safety of rebuilding, and some, while waiting, have sold and left town.

"At least now we know what the rules are," said Al Petrie, a resident of the Lakeview neighborhood who is buying up distressed properties in hopes of rebuilding the area. "I just wish this had been done five months ago."

Left open by the announcement is just how much Louisianans must contribute to the \$2.5 billion spending proposal, and some state leaders reacted angrily to the possibility that their financially strapped home will have to pitch in as

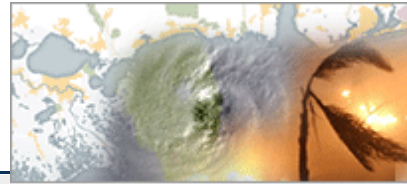


Malcolm and Gena Olds's house in lower Plaquemines Parish was swept away by Hurricane Katrina. Malcolm Olds, pointing toward the Mississippi River levee, says he is unlikely to reinvest there. Federal officials are studying whether the improvements in the parish would be economically justifiable. (By Peter Whoriskey -- The Washington Post)

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much as \$900 million to the project.



The Bush administration has requested or received approval from Congress for \$3.5 billion in levee improvements, and none of those plans require state contributions. At the same time, fiscal conservatives have grown increasingly impatient with the growth of federal spending.

Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.) mocked the request for state funding toward the additional \$2.5 billion and said the administration should say when it will ask for the money.

"It's like the man who throws you a 30-foot rope when you're drowning 50 feet from shore and says he's gone more than halfway," said Landrieu, who has vowed to block Senate action on Bush nominations to non-defense and judicial posts until the issue is resolved. "A noble gesture, perhaps, but it doesn't get the job done."

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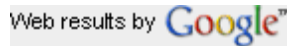
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