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Competing Plans to Repair New Orleans Flood Protection

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At the halfway mark between the onslaught of Hurricane Katrina last year and the beginning of the 2006 hurricane season on June 1, the Army Corps of Engineers has completed only 16 percent of its planned repairs to New Orleans's battered flood protection system, according to corps representatives.

The corps says its work is on track for restoring the system to its pre-hurricane strength by the June 1 deadline, but in the meantime many groups that have studied the disaster are coming up with proposals of their own that they say could be cheaper, faster or stronger.

The Bring New Orleans Back Commission, the group formed by Mayor C. Ray Nagin to produce a blueprint for the city's recovery, issued a proposal on Wednesday to upgrade hurricane protection with measures beyond what the corps has called for. To prevent storm surges from pushing into the city's drainage canals, the commission proposed a series of jetties to stand in front of the three canals, which it says could be built quickly and cheaply and provide New Orleans with some much-needed peace of mind.

"There is, very much, a tension between things that can be done quickly versus those that might take a little longer," Lawrence Roth, deputy executive director of the American Society of Civil Engineers, said in a telephone interview on Friday. His group has weighed in with far-reaching recommendations, and other groups are preparing proposals of their own.

The mayor's commission also proposed a network of dams that would block or slow the opening between the Inner Harbor Navigational Canal and

Lake Pontchartrain, and block storm surges from flowing up the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, a navigation channel that has been blamed for a storm surge funnel effect that increased the damage to eastern New Orleans.

The group is also calling for long-term flood-control structures that would block or slow surges at the two passes between Lake Pontchartrain and the Gulf of Mexico.

The fast-track structures would cost \$100 million to \$170 million, according to the commission's estimates, a fraction of the \$3.1 billion the federal government has proposed spending on flood control measures in the area. The commission said its proposals would not interfere with any of the corps's plans, but would be add-ons that complement the current plans.

The proposals have not yet found broad support among other engineering experts who have been working on strengthening New Orleans's storm defenses, but Dan Hitchings, the director of the corps's Task Force Hope, which is coordinating the hurricane response in Louisiana and Mississippi, said the plans were welcome and would be examined.

Mr. Roth, of the Society of Civil Engineers, said there would always be competing ideas about how to improve flood protection. The idea of jetties, he said, might be made moot by closing off the canals and putting in new pumping stations at the lake, as the corps has planned.

"Many different people can look at a problem and come up with many different solutions, all with tradeoffs," he said. "Which would be better - jetties or a pump station? You might never get an answer to that."

Meanwhile, the corps's work to restore flood protection to its pre-hurricane levels continues around the clock. This month the corps solicited bids for building temporary closures and pumps at the mouths of the city's three drainage canals, and it is rebuilding long stretches of levee in St. Bernard Parish and along the Inner Harbor Navigational Canal.

The corps is looking to measures that will further strengthen the flood protection system, including restoring levees to their originally designed heights. These measures can be in place by September 2007, according to the corps.

Beyond that, the corps has embarked on a two-year, \$8 million study to determine how to strengthen the hurricane protection system for New Orleans and southern Louisiana. A preliminary version of that report is due in June.

While the Bush administration's top official on Gulf Coast reconstruction, Donald Powell, has said the government will build a system that is "better and stronger" than what was there before, the administration has not committed to what the people of New Orleans desperately want: protection from Category 5 storms, the toughest that nature can dish out.

Mr. Hitchings said that the corps was slightly behind schedule but that he expected things to move quickly. "It's not linear," he said, because the "gear-up time" to get contractors in place and to make materials like the enormous quantities of soil available was so great.

Now "they're really moving out," he said. The corps built 30 days of weather delays into the schedule, he said, and with a little help from favorable weather, "I'm very optimistic that they will regain their schedule and in the end get it all finished with plenty of time."

The corps's long-term study, he said, would probably have a lot in common with the outside proposals that are beginning to flow in, but "right now, we're focused on the very near term."

The engineering society is investigating the failure of the levees and is working with the groups that will monitor the corps's progress. Its recommendations include "armoring" the dry side of levees so they are not eroded away from underneath if water spills over the top. Without armoring, Mr. Roth said, "failure is catastrophic because it causes the wall to fail."

The corps has said that the armoring process, like other projects that would go beyond the restoration of the levees to pre-hurricane strength, will have to be approved by Congress.

"It's going to take people being willing to take a chance, to be bold, to sort out Louisiana's levee problems," said Ivor van Heerden, deputy director of the Louisiana State University Hurricane Center and a member of Team Louisiana, the group formed by the state to investigate the causes of the levee failures. His group, too, will be making proposals for upgrading protection for the region.

"We may get lucky," he said. "Nature may give us another 10 years before we get another Katrina, or maybe not. But we've got to seize the

moment or we're going to lose coastal Louisiana."

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