

# Information Clearing House

NEWS YOU WON'T FIND ON CNN

 E-MAIL TO A FRIEND

## Why the Levee Broke

By Will Bunch, Attytood

**09/01/05 "AlterNet"** -- -- Even though Hurricane Katrina has moved well north of the city, the waters continued to rise in New Orleans on Wednesday. That's because Lake Pontchartrain continues to pour through a two-block-long break in the main levee, near the city's 17th Street Canal. With much of the Crescent City some 10 feet below sea level, the rising tide may not stop until it's level with the massive lake.

There have been numerous reports of bodies floating in the poorest neighborhoods of this poverty-plagued city, but the truth is that the death toll may not be known for days, because the conditions continue to frustrate rescue efforts.

New Orleans had long known it was highly vulnerable to flooding and a direct hit from a hurricane. In fact, the federal government has been working with state and local officials in the region since the late 1960s on major hurricane and flood relief efforts. When flooding from a massive rainstorm in May 1995 killed six people, Congress authorized the Southeast Louisiana Urban Flood Control Project, or SELA.

Over the next 10 years, the Army Corps of Engineers, tasked with carrying out SELA, spent \$430 million on shoring up levees and building pumping stations, with \$50 million in local aid. But at least \$250 million in crucial projects remained, even as hurricane activity in the Atlantic Basin increased dramatically and the levees surrounding New Orleans continued to subside.

Yet after 2003, the flow of federal dollars toward SELA dropped to a trickle. The Corps never tried to hide the fact that the spending pressures of the war in Iraq, as well as homeland security -- coming at the same time as federal tax cuts -- was the reason for the strain. At least nine articles in the Times-Picayune from 2004 and 2005 specifically cite the cost of Iraq as a reason for the lack of hurricane- and

flood-control dollars.

Newhouse News Service, in an article posted late Tuesday night at The Times-Picayune Web site, reported: "No one can say they didn't see it coming. ... Now in the wake of one of the worst storms ever, serious questions are being asked about the lack of preparation."

In early 2004, as the cost of the conflict in Iraq soared, President Bush proposed spending less than 20 percent of what the Corps said was needed for Lake Pontchartrain, according to this Feb. 16, 2004, article, in New Orleans CityBusiness:

The \$750 million Lake Pontchartrain and Vicinity Hurricane Protection project is another major Corps project, which remains about 20% incomplete due to lack of funds, said Al Naomi, project manager. That project consists of building up levees and protection for pumping stations on the east bank of the Mississippi River in Orleans, St. Bernard, St. Charles and Jefferson parishes.

The Lake Pontchartrain project is slated to receive \$3.9 million in the president's 2005 budget. Naomi said about \$20 million is needed.

"The longer we wait without funding, the more we sink," he said. "I've got at least six levee construction contracts that need to be done to raise the levee protection back to where it should be (because of settling). Right now I owe my contractors about \$5 million. And we're going to have to pay them interest."

On June 8, 2004, Walter Maestri, emergency management chief for Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, told the Times-Picayune: "It appears that the money has been

moved in the president's budget to handle homeland security and the war in Iraq, and I suppose that's the price we pay. Nobody locally is happy that the levees can't be finished, and we are doing everything we can to make the case that this is a security issue for us."

That June, with the 2004 hurricane season starting, the Corps' Naomi went before a local agency, the East Jefferson Levee Authority, and essentially begged for \$2 million for urgent work that Washington was now unable to pay for. From the June 18, 2004 Times-Picayune:

"The system is in great shape, but the levees are sinking. Everything is sinking, and if we don't get the money fast enough to raise them, then we can't stay ahead of the settlement," he said. "The problem that we have isn't that the levee is low, but that the federal funds have dried up so that we can't raise them."

The panel authorized that money, and on July 1, 2004, it had to pony up another \$250,000 when it learned that stretches of the levee in Metairie had sunk by four feet. The agency had to pay for the work with higher property taxes. The levee board noted in October 2004 that the feds were also now not paying for a hoped-for \$15 million project to better shore up the banks of Lake Pontchartrain.

The 2004 hurricane season was the worst in decades. In spite of that, the federal government came back this spring with the steepest reduction in hurricane- and flood-control funding for New Orleans in history. Because of the proposed cuts, the Corps office there imposed a hiring freeze. Officials said that money targeted for the SELA project -- \$10.4 million, down from \$36.5 million -- was not enough to start any new jobs. According to New Orleans CityBusiness this June 5:

The district has identified \$35 million in projects to build and improve levees, floodwalls and pumping stations in St. Bernard, Orleans, Jefferson and St. Charles parishes. Those projects are included in a Corps line item called Lake Pontchartrain, where funding is scheduled to be cut from \$5.7 million this year to \$2.9 million in 2006. Naomi said it's enough to pay salaries but little else.

"We'll do some design work. We'll design the contracts and get them ready to go if we get the money. But we don't have the money to put the work in the field, and that's the problem," Naomi said.

There was, at the same time, a growing recognition that more research was needed to see what New Orleans must do to protect itself from a Category 4 or 5 hurricane. But once again, the money was not there. As the Times-Picayune reported last Sept. 22:

That second study would take about four years to complete and would cost about \$4 million, said Army Corps of Engineers project manager Al Naomi. About \$300,000 in federal money was proposed for the 2005 fiscal-year budget, and the state had agreed to match that amount.

But the cost of the Iraq war forced the Bush administration to order the New Orleans district office not to begin any new studies, and the 2005 budget no longer includes the needed money, he said.

The Senate was seeking to restore some of the SELA funding cuts for 2006. But now it's too late. One project that a contractor had been racing to finish this summer was a bridge and levee job right at the 17th Street Canal, site of the main breach on Monday. The levee failure appears to be causing a human tragedy of epic proportions: "We probably have 80 percent of our city under water; with some sections of our city the water is as deep as 20 feet. Both airports are underwater," Mayor Ray Nagin told a radio interviewer.

The Newhouse News Service article published Tuesday night observed, "The Louisiana congressional delegation urged Congress earlier this year to dedicate a stream of federal money to Louisiana's coast, only to be opposed by the White House. ... In its budget, the Bush administration proposed a significant reduction in funding for southeast Louisiana's chief hurricane protection project. Bush proposed \$10.4 million, a sixth of what local officials say they need."

Washington knew that this day could come at any time, and it knew the things that needed to be done to protect the citizens of New Orleans. But in the tradition of the riverboat gambler, the Bush administration decided to roll the dice on its fool's errand in Iraq, and on a tax cut that mainly benefitted the rich. Now Bush has lost that gamble, big time.

The president told us that we needed to fight in Iraq to save lives here at home. Yet -- after moving billions of domestic dollars to the Persian Gulf -- there are bodies floating through the streets of Louisiana. What does George W. Bush have to say for himself now?

*Will Bunch is a senior writer at the Philadelphia Daily News and author of the blog [Attytood](#).*

© 2005 Independent Media Institute. All rights reserved.

### Translate this page

*(In accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107, this material is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving the included information for research and educational purposes. Information Clearing House has no affiliation whatsoever with the originator of this article nor is Information Clearing House endorsed or sponsored by the originator.)*

 E-MAIL TO A FRIEND

**Join our Daily News Headlines Email Digest**

Fill out your emailaddress  
to receive our newsletter!

[Subscribe](#)   [Unsubscribe](#)

[Powered by YourMailinglistProvider.  
com](#)

**Information Clearing House**

**Daily News Headlines Digest**

[HOME](#)

[COPYRIGHT NOTICE](#)