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Louisiana Goes After Federal Billions

By Michael Grunwald and Susan B. Glasser
Washington Post Staff Writers
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Louisiana's congressional delegation has requested \$40 billion for Army Corps of Engineers projects in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, about 10 times the annual Corps budget for the entire nation, or 16 times the amount the Corps has said it would need to protect New Orleans from a Category 5 hurricane.

Louisiana Sens. David Vitter (R) and Mary Landrieu (D) tucked the request into their \$250 billion Hurricane Katrina Disaster Relief and Economic Recovery Act, the state's opening salvo in the scramble for federal dollars.

The bill, unveiled last week, would create a powerful "Pelican Commission" controlled by Louisiana residents that would decide which Corps projects to fund, and ordered the commission to consider several controversial navigation projects that have nothing to do with flood protection. The Corps section of the Louisiana bill, which was supported by the entire state delegation, was based on recommendations from a "working group" dominated by lobbyists for ports, shipping firms, energy companies and other corporate interests.

The bill would exempt any Corps projects approved by the commission from provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act and the Clean Water Act. It would also waive the usual Corps cost-sharing requirements, ensuring that federal taxpayers would pay every dime.

With the public eager to help Katrina's victims, President Bush and Congress have already approved \$62.3 billion in spending for the Gulf Coast. But some budget hawks are grumbling about the impact on the deficit; the Louisiana delegation's \$250 billion bill would cost more than the Louisiana Purchase under the Jefferson administration on an inflation-adjusted basis. Some critics of federal water projects said the \$40 billion Corps request could make the delegation look especially greedy and undermine support for the state's reconstruction plans.

Vitter and Landrieu have described their bill as a starting point for congressional deliberations, but one GOP Senate aide said they should not expect to get their entire wish list, voicing particular skepticism of the funding for the Corps. Even before Katrina, Louisiana received more Corps funding than any other state, and that was less than \$400 million a year.

The overall Corps budget for fiscal 2005 was \$4 billion, and Corps officials have estimated that they could upgrade the New Orleans flood protection system to defend against a Category 5 storm for about \$2.5 billion.

"This bill boggles the mind," said Steve Ellis, a water resources expert at Taxpayers for Common Sense. "Brazen doesn't begin to describe it. The Louisiana delegation is using Katrina as an excuse to resurrect a laundry list of pork projects."

Aides to Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco (D) helped shape the bill. The governor yesterday asked for \$31.7 billion in federal funds for her state's infrastructure, including \$20 billion for hurricane protections -- which aides described as a down payment on the larger sum.

The bill directs the Pelican (Protecting Essential Louisiana Infrastructure, Citizens and Nature) Commission to study several key flood-protection projects, as well as a \$14 billion ecosystem restoration for Louisiana's vanishing coastal marshes, which help protect vulnerable communities against storm surges.

But the list of potential projects also includes a 50-year-old plan for a \$750 million lock for the New Orleans Industrial Canal, a project rated the fifth-worst Corps boondoggle in the country by an alliance of taxpayer advocates and environmentalists. It also includes an effort to deepen the Port of Iberia for oil and gas tankers, a project that the Corps had concluded would provide only 30 cents of economic benefit for each dollar expended by taxpayers.

Vitter and Landrieu did not return calls. But in a news conference Thursday after they unveiled their bill, they described it as an unprecedented response to an unprecedented tragedy, and said that rebuilding their state as quickly as possible would have long-term benefits for the nation. They said their requests were based on recommendations from Louisiana's municipal, spiritual, educational, medical and commercial leaders.

"We're going to fight hard for every dollar," Landrieu said. "We wanted to tell people the truth: It's going to be an expensive recovery, but worth the investment."

Corps funding is only part of what Louisiana wants. The 440-page bill also includes \$50 billion in open-ended grants for storm-ravaged communities and \$13 billion for the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development, along with mortgage assistance, health care, substance abuse treatment and other services for hurricane victims. It also includes hefty payments to hospitals, ports, banks, shipbuilders, fishermen and schools, as well as \$8 million for alligator farms, \$35 million for seafood industry marketing, and \$25 million for a sugar-cane research laboratory that had not been completed before Katrina.

The bill did not specify where the money would come from, but several billion dollars a year would presumably flow from a provision allowing Louisiana to keep half



Sen. David Vitter foresees benefit to the nation.
(Chris Kleponis - Reuters)



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the offshore oil and gas revenue paid to the federal government, a long-standing demand of the state's delegation.

The coastal protection section may be the most contentious part of the bill, overturning a slew of Corps precedents, but Louisiana officials say that past practice has failed to protect their state. They say their communities do not have the money to pay the standard 30 percent local share for Corps hurricane protection, or the time to wait several years for standard Corps studies.

Their model is the federal response to the great Mississippi River flood of 1927, which launched a massive Corps project to control the river at federal expense. The Louisiana officials say it is no coincidence that the river's levees held during Katrina, while flood walls funded through the normal Corps process buckled.

"That's the kind of monumental effort we need today," said W. Clifford Smith, a member of the Mississippi River Commission from Louisiana.

Vitter and Landrieu tapped John M. Barry -- author of "Rising Tide," the definitive history of the 1927 flood -- to lead the working group on the Corps response to Katrina. Almost all the other members of the group were lobbyists from firms such as Patton Boggs, Adams & Reese, the Alpine Group, Dutko Worldwide, Van Scoyoc Associates, and a firm owned by former senator J. Bennett Johnston (D-La.). There was a lobbyist for the Port of New Orleans, a lobbyist for Verizon, and three lobbyists who were former aides to House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Don Young (R-Alaska).

Internal notes from the working group obtained by The Washington Post suggest that hurricane protection was by no means its sole preoccupation. A list of "outstanding issues" from a Sept. 15 conference call mentioned the possibility of authorizing at least six unrelated navigation projects, and included questions such as "Are there other things we can do to boost our ports?" and -- perhaps a joke -- "How much can I bill my client?"

"My concern was that the focus was not on protecting Louisiana," said Ivor van Heerden, the deputy director of Louisiana State University's Hurricane Center and one of the few non-lobbyists on the working group.

Barry declined to comment on the bill, saying he needed to study the details. But several members of the working group said that van Heerden and Barry pushed for the National Academy of Sciences to oversee the work of the Corps, a recommendation not included in the final bill.

There was also discussion of closing the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, a little-used navigation canal that may have helped amplify Katrina's storm surge, but there was no mention of that in the bill, either.

If Vitter, Landrieu and the rest of the delegation get their way, the final decisions will be made by the nine-member Pelican Commission -- which would have at least six Louisiana residents -- on the basis of a plan provided by the Corps.



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