

LEADING SCIENTISTS PRESENT CONCERNS TO CONGRESS OVER RECENT UNITED STATES ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS' INTERIM REPORT ON THE MR-GO

December 21, 2006, New Orleans, LA - Several prominent scientists and engineers—, including Dr. Ivor van Heerden (Deputy Director, LSU Hurricane Center and Associate Professor Civil and Environmental Engineering); Dr. Paul Kemp (Associate Professor, LSU Hurricane Center, School of the Coast and the Environment); Dr. John Day (Distinguished Professor Emeritus, LSU Department of Oceanography and Coastal Sciences, School of the Coast and Environment); Dr. Sherwood Gagliano (Louisiana Coastal Scientist); and Dr. Robert Bea (Professor, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, University of California, Berkeley)—have submitted a “Statement of Concerns” to Congress over the Army Corps’ recent Interim Report concerning the “Mississippi River Gulf Outlet and Deep-Draft De-Authorization.” These hurricane protection and environmental engineering scientists—among the most preeminent in the United States—have studied the effects of the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet on the catastrophic flooding in New Orleans East, the Upper and Lower Ninth Ward and St. Bernard Parish.

In their statement sent today to Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi and Senator Harry Reid—the incoming leaders of the House and Senate—the signatories sharply criticize the Army Corps for failing to acknowledge the “clear and present danger posed by the MR-GO to public safety and property” in Greater New Orleans and for its “chronic lack of a sense of urgency.” In their transmittal letter, these scientists—who have participated in several of the independent studies of the Katrina flooding causes sponsored by the National Science Foundation, University of California at Berkeley, and the Louisiana State University Hurricane Center—characterize the unremediated MR-GO as an “environmental cancer” and “a ticking time bomb in the heart of Orleans and St. Bernard Parishes.”

In the Interim Report, the Corps advocated closure of the MR-GO mainly for economic reasons. The report also concluded that the MR-GO did not contribute materially to hurricane storm surge during Hurricane Katrina—a conclusion the scientists found “shocking, yet sadly predictable, given both the Army Corps’ historic institutional ‘blind spot’ to its project and the MR-GO’s well documented role in the loss of hundreds of lives and tens of thousands of homes, businesses, schools, hospitals, government facilities and other property.”

The scientists find fault with the Corps’ failure to provide a comprehensive plan for closing the MR-GO, to devise effective measures for hurricane and surge protection recommend ways to minimize the effects of MR-GO on precious wetlands—despite being ordered to do so by Congress.

The scientists also echo Senator David Vitter’s concerns voiced clearly in his December 14, 2006 letter to Colonel Wagenaar of the Army Corps. In that letter, Senator Vitter states that “the closure of the MRGO is a forgone conclusion...” and that the “fundamental problem [is] stopping saltwater intrusion that has slowly destroyed the

MRGO ecosystem over the last several decades and restoring barriers protecting St. Bernard and Orleans parishes from storm surge.”

“The Interim Report falls short of what Congress requested on just about every level,” said Dr. Paul Kemp. “The Army Corps was charged with developing a plan to recommend modifications to the MR-GO *and* measures for hurricane and storm protection and restoration and protection of wetlands. Instead, the Army Corps, by its characteristic inaction in the face of great jeopardy to the people and communities of Greater New Orleans, requires that the residents whose lives have been so harmed by the MR-GO wait until December, 2007 for its final report.”

The scientists disagreed with the Corps’ Interim Report on several key points:

1 - The scientists cite data – including studies conducted by the Corps itself– which concludes that the MR-GO created a substantial danger of elevating storm surge levels. The Corps’ Interim Report denies these obvious storm surge dangers.

2 – The Interim Report discusses possible closure of the MR-GO to all navigation by building an earth dam south of Bayou La Loutre, but makes no recommendations for hurricane protection over 24 miles northwest in the upper Reach 2 and Reach 1 of the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway—where there is a well documented funnel effect that caused surge—at least 10 feet traveling at great speed for a prolonged duration—to overtop floodwalls and breach levees. The failure to acknowledge this basis scientific fact—and recommend a solution is “a glaring omission” according to the Statement of Concerns.

3- The Interim Report deferred recommendations for immediate wetlands restoration in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The loss of 65,000 acres (101 square miles) of marshlands and cypress forests eliminates a natural and effective buffer for storm surge and are disappearing hourly.

Citing a chronic lack of urgency on the part of the Corps, the scientists urge Congress to appoint a panel of independent scientists and engineers to devise a plan for mitigating storm surge.