

ASCE Recommends Ways to Improve New Orleans Flood Protection, Levee System

February 24, 2006

A report issued this week by ASCE's External Review Panel (ERP)—a group organized to provide independent peer review of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' effort to rebuild the New Orleans levees—identified areas requiring urgent attention by the federal government and the state of Louisiana.

“We have been, and will continue to provide the [Interagency Performance Evaluation Task Force] with comments, questions and suggestions based on their methodology, work product and conclusions,” said ERP Chair David Daniel, Ph.D., P.E., president of the University of Texas, Dallas. “However, despite the fact that some of the critical concerns we have identified fall outside of the IPET’s scope of work, the ERP feels it has a responsibility to the citizens of New Orleans and the American people to comment on these fundamental issues and encourage their comprehensive assessment.”

One main area of concern is the lack of organizational responsibility for the entire hurricane protection system—including the region’s 350-plus miles of levees. Responsibility for the levees’ construction and maintenance falls on multiple local levee districts, and the responsibility for operation and maintenance of the individual pumping stations falls on individual Parishes. The end result is a piecemeal system that can only be as strong as its weakest link. The ERP views any future rebuilding and operation of the levees that does not address this issue as ineffective.

An equally important issue, and one also not addressed in the IPET’s scope of work, is the lack of system-oriented strategy for the hurricane protection within the region. The current system evolved over several decades—a series of individual pieces joined together in purpose, as opposed to a robust and resilient integrated system. A system-wide strategy would provide protection for such critical elements as hospitals, electrical generation facilities and emergency shelters, as well as a level of redundancy that could protect the community from complete loss should the levee fail. The ERP believes the absence of this type of strategy in the current system deserves serious additional consideration.

ASCE has worked with congress to introduce the National Levee Safety Program Act (H.R. 4650), legislation that would assist states in identifying and evaluating conditions of levees nationwide. The bill was introduced in December by House Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Water Resources and the Environment Chairman John Duncan (R-TN).

For more information on the ERP report, visit <http://www.asce.org>

For more information on the National Levee Safety Program Act visit ASCE’s “Six Clicks” advocacy website at <http://www.asce.org/advocacy.html>

This weekly report is written by the American Society of Civil Engineers' Government Relations Staff. If you have any questions or comments about any items in this report please email govwash@asce.org.