

OPINION

Call Bush, tell him to approve our levees

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Guest Columnist

The Morganza-to-the-Gulf hurricane-protection project reached a major milestone last week.



Walker

Congress authorized the project through the passage of the Water Resources Development Act. While this achievement should bring an abundance of enthusiasm, it only brings a nervous observation as we wait to see if Presi-

dent Bush will veto or sign the bill. He has 10 days to do so.

Once again, we ask Morganza supporters to contact the president and ask him to reconsider his veto threat on the WRDA bill. When doing so, please emphasize the importance of the Morganza project to the survival of this region. You can contact the president by e-mail at comments@whitehouse.gov or by fax at 202-456-2461.

If the president does follow through on his threat to veto the WRDA bill, we are hoping that Congress will override the veto. Therefore, we ask supporters to contact their friends and family members in other parts of the country and request them to contact their congressional representatives, requesting that they vote to override any WRDA veto. Contact information for all senators and representatives is online at www.senate.gov and www.house.gov.

Many critics have suggested that Morganza does not incorporate lessons learned from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita two years ago. We can point to many examples of where they are wrong. Prior to each phase of construction, Morganza continues to undergo design and engineering scrutiny to incorporate lessons learned and



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Crews work on a 3-mile segment of the Morganza-to-the-Gulf levee in March near Pointe-aux-Chenes. Work has gotten started on a limited basis using local tax money, while federal money sought to pay about two-thirds of the estimated \$900 million cost remains uncertain.

to ensure the best possible alignment with maximum benefit to the environment.

Morganza has undergone 15 years of design and engineering analysis on the state and federal levels, with various alternatives considered throughout the study. Where were the critics during the public comment periods? Nowhere to be found or heard from.

Suddenly, everyone has learned lessons about hurricanes and what is required for protection, most notably those who are not exposed to hurricane devastation and those who enjoy the protection of existing levee systems.

From the perspective of a community that has no levee protection and could be "ground zero" in the bull's-eye of the next "right-positioned" storm, some of the lessons learned over the 15 years since the project's inception are as follows:

- Our natural storm-surge barrier – our coast – is disappearing daily and disappearing faster all the time. The Gulf is getting closer. Rita taught us that a storm making landfall 200 miles away can cause major flooding and devastation to lower portions of Terrebonne and unprotected portions of Lafourche.

- Coastal communities are better

off behind a levee than without one between them and the Gulf. Again, Rita flooded Terrebonne but not parts of Lafourche and St. Mary parishes, which had levees, including communities that were closer to Rita's center.

- Large, unobstructed passageways for water, such as the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, the St. Bernard Parish waterway commonly called the "Mr. Go" and the Houma Navigation Canal closer to home, create a pathway for disaster if storm surge is not impeded and buffered. Rita showed us the effects of not building a lock and floodgate on the MRGO, and the probable effects of not building the Morganza project lock and floodgate on the Houma Navigation Canal.

- The only authorized levee and lock project for this region is Morganza-to-the-Gulf, and it has taken us over 20 years to get the project to its currently authorized stage. To suggest further delays is to suggest suicide for our communities and our way of life.

- We are 20 years too late in building large-scale coastal-restoration projects that will restore our natural buffer system, the barrier islands. While restoration projects are necessary and should be pursued, our community does not have the luxury of time to wait for them to be implemented. Mor-

ganza, in fact, includes wetland-restoration features that will enhance the marshes through a series of environmental structures and the Houma Navigation Canal lock.

- Doing away with Morganza is not an option to those of us who want to continue living, working and playing in this place we call "home." Nonetheless, we do want to build the best possible project with the best alignment in an expeditious manner. Studying the project to death will only result in the death of our coastal community and all of its bountiful resources.

The president is wrong in his intention to veto WRDA. We can be heard on this, but it will take your voice, added to the crescendo, to get his and Congress' attention.

Please help us push WRDA to its final passage so that we can move forward with this vital project. Reach out to the president and to Congress. Our lives here depend upon it.

Daniel J. Walker is a Houma attorney and president of the Morganza Action Coalition, a local group lobbying Congress in favor of the hurricane-protection system.