

KATRINA AND OREGON INLET

A Proposed op-ed for the N & O by Orrin Pilkey

Congress is in the throes of considering the Feingold-McCain sponsored Water Resources Planning and Modernization Act of 2006 (S. 2288) to modernize the US Army Corps of Engineers. Although the Corps has a long and controversial record of planning and project management, the failed levees in New Orleans have proved to be the tipping point.

While the destruction of much of a major city by a Hurricane is arguably the greatest engineering disaster in our nation's history, the Corps has basically denied that the levee failure was their fault. A panel of experts sponsored by the Corps even suggested that the failure of the levees was unforeseeable. But engineers on two separate panels formed by the American Society of Civil Engineers and the National Science Foundation said the mode of failure was quite predictable.

In the 5 years before Katrina, Louisiana received more Corps funding (\$1.9 billion) than any other state. But instead of bolstering the New Orleans levees, widely recognized as a critical need, the Corps concentrated on more politically fruitful projects in the delta, such as the \$100 million rock-lined Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO) channel leading to the Gulf of Mexico from New Orleans.

Immense benefits were initially proclaimed for the MRGO channel in the Corps' economic study, but it has proven to be an economic bust. Ship traffic is of the order of one or two per day, and when channel maintenance costs are considered, the federal expenditure comes to \$13,000 of taxpayer's money per vessel.

For years scientists and local politicians alike warned the Corps that the MRGO channel would funnel and enhance storm surge, leading to a break in the levees. That's exactly what happened in Katrina when the lower 9th ward flooded.

Many parallels can be drawn between the Corps' management of the levees around New Orleans and the Oregon Inlet Jetty project on North Carolina's Outer Banks, which was recently singled out during congressional testimony by the Government Accounting Agency (GAO) as a prime example of why the Corps must be reformed.

According to a March 2006 GAO report, "The Corps analysis [to justify the jetty project] did not consider all alternatives to the project, used outdated data to estimate benefits to fishing trawlers, did not account for the effects on smaller fishing vessels and used some incorrect and outdated data to estimate damages and losses to fishing vessels." If the Corps had used the actual numbers of vessels, "benefits would have been reduced by about 90%---"

In addition, estimated damages to vessels plying the channel (without jetties) was based on a Corps assumption that every vessel would go aground once each year, resulting in \$7,000 damage per vessel - a number that appears to have been pulled from thin air.

The GAO report only dealt with the latest analysis (2001) by the Corps. In my book *The Corps and the Shore*, I document a number of other less than honest practices by the Wilmington District to justify the jetties.

The Corps' disingenuous handling of the Oregon Inlet Jetty issue has caused real damage to the state in ways that may not be immediately obvious. The DOT, for example, wants to replace the aging Bonner Bridge across Oregon Inlet with an environmentally sound, high-span bridge that would let the inlet migrate and, at the same time, avoid the need to repair State Highway 12 after each storm. But Dare County officials vetoed this plan because of the lingering hope, based on the Corps' analyses, that the jetties would somehow, someday be built.

The Corps is not the sole reason why the levees failed, or why bad shoreline projects are becoming commonplace. Rather than being a servant of the people, the Corps is a servant of the congress. Rather than being funded on a dependable annual basis like most government agencies, the Corps is dependant on project money allocated by Congress. No projects, no funding. No funding, no jobs. Under these circumstances, no agency can be expected to be honest and competent. With both the jetties and the levees, the Corps went the politically expedient way.

The Feingold-McCain bill, if passed, will provide independent oversight of Corps projects to assure meaningful economic evaluations and improved project management. It will also require the Corps to follow national, rather than political, priorities.

Some members of congress, clearly anxious to preserve their pork barrel privileges, oppose this bill. But Katrina has made it clear that the US Army Corps of Engineers must follow a different path.

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