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NEWS

Louisiana may need to match hurricane protection funds

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By **AMY WOLD**
Advocate staff writer
Published: Feb 27, 2008 - Page: 12A

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The state could have to come up with \$1.8 billion during the next four years to provide its share of building New Orleans-area hurricane protection.

"We're facing a significant challenge," Garret Graves, director of the Governor's Office of Coastal Affairs, told the state Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority on Tuesday. Graves chairs the authority.

Congress has approved \$7.1 billion so far for building and elevating levee and hurricane protection in southeast Louisiana, said Mike Park, program manager for hurricane storm risk reduction for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

It's estimated an additional \$7.5 billion will be required to complete the work, he said.

In the fiscal year 2009 budget request submitted to Congress earlier this month, the corps is asking for \$5.7 billion, with the state required to match with \$1.8 billion, Park said.

Since the hurricane protection work is expected to be

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completed by 2011, the state needs to provide the money within the next four years, Graves said.

Authority members asked whether the federal government could increase its share of the project costs or extend the time in which the state could make payments.

"I do think we have been let down by the White House," said John Barry, a CPRA member representing Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority East. "The president has not kept to his promise."

President George W. Bush promised to help the region recover from the hurricanes of 2005 but now expects the state of Louisiana to come up with large sums of money in a short period of time while still working through recovery, Barry said. Instead, the state should be given more time — 30 years has been used in other cases — to make payments while the work proceeds, he said.

Another potential increase in state costs could occur with coastal restoration projects that take water from the Mississippi River, according to recent statements by corps personnel.

Melanie Goodman, corps acting program manager for Coastal Wetland Planning, Protection and Restoration Act, said if a diversion project creates more dredging work for the corps, the diversion project needs to pay for that work.

Freshwater diversions have been a major part of restoration and protections plans developed by the corps and the state.

CPRA members expressed concern that this issue is being brought up now when Congress has finally approved several large projects to divert freshwater from Mississippi River.

"We've been discussing diversions with the corps for eight years or longer," said King Milling, a CPRA member. "And there's never been any discussion about this (before)."

The Davis Pond and Caernarvon freshwater diversion projects — in St. Charles Parish and at the St. Bernard-Plaquemines line, respectively — have been operating for years without problems, several members pointed out.

"This has the potential to disrupt progress on projects," Graves said, but added he thinks the state and the corps can still work out a compromise on the diversion projects issue.

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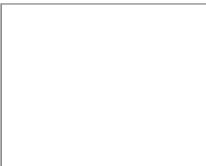
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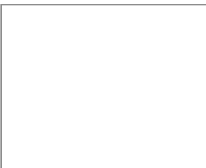
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