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The Times-Picayune

Local leaders tell corps about levee trade-offs

Survey asks about acceptable sacrifices

Thursday, July 31, 2008

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Government, business, environmental and neighborhood leaders on Wednesday helped Army Corps of Engineers planners choose which of dozens of alternatives should be included in a new master plan for protecting Louisiana's coast.

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But instead of studying maps and voicing concerns about particular footprints for levees and coastal restoration projects, the dozens of participants in two meetings at the University of New Orleans filled out complicated computer matrix forms that measured how they value saving lives, protecting property value or jobs, creating or protecting wetlands and other natural resources, and keeping historic properties and neighborhoods or archaeological sites from being flooded.

The program asked each participant to place a weight between 0 and 100 on each of the metrics, or trade-offs.

Then it compared the values of those decisions, in dollars, lives and homes saved, allowing each participant to reconsider their decisions based on the results.

--- This one, or this one? ---

After the initial weights for each metric were determined, the stakeholders were presented with their totals, and then were required to choose between variations of their lists and alternatives, in a focusing technique similar to that used by an optician to test a patient's eyeglasses prescription. It's a process called swing-weighting, which has been used in recent years by the Department of

Defense to help guide decisions on which military bases should be closed.

The computer program gives participants a way to add weight to their views.

The weighting exercise makes it easier for planners to determine the views of different stakeholder groups. At the two meetings on Wednesday, there were representatives of local governments, environmental groups, businesses operating behind levees and shipping interests, and landowners.

The meetings are being repeated this week all across the coast.

Its use in determining what combinations of levee and restoration projects should be included in the Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration Plan -- the corps study that will recommend ways to protect the state's coastal communities from the equivalent of Category 5 hurricanes -- was recommended earlier this year by a National Academy of Sciences independent review committee.

That committee said early efforts by local corps officials to measure the public's view of the trade-offs that will be required were not working.

The results from the computer scoring exercise won't be known for some time, corps officials said.

--- Examining trade-offs ---

Here's an explanation of each of the 10 metrics weighed during Wednesday's meetings:

-- Population affected: This represents the number of residents each year who would experience flooding after any plan was implemented. The highest number of people flooded would occur with the no-action alternative, which would mean no improvements after levees are raised to 100-year protection levels in 2011, while the lowest would be for plans that assume protection from a 1,000-year storm.

-- Residual damages: This represents the cost of losses that would occur even after the completion of improvements, again ranging from existing 100-year protection to 1,000-year improvements.

-- Life cycle cost: This represents the cost to design and construct projects, which probably will be shared by federal, state and local governments, plus the cost of operating and maintaining the projects once they are complete. The state and local governments are expected to pay the overwhelming majority of those later costs.

-- Construction time: Building projects faster probably means higher costs.

-- Employment affected: This measures the number of jobs disrupted for one or more days because of flooding after particular plans are built. The higher the protection, the fewer jobs disrupted.

-- Direct wetland impacts: Construction of levees and wetland restoration projects will result in some lost or damaged wetlands, which would have to be offset by the creation of more wetlands. Thus, no levee improvements would result in the fewest acres of wetlands destroyed.

-- Indirect environmental impact: This measure compares the positive or negative effects to the environment of alternative plans, including impacts on water flow, fisheries, the potential to build new wetlands, and the consistency of each alternative with the plan's overall coastal restoration goals.

-- Historic properties protected: This represents the number of properties considered historic that would be protected from flooding by each alternative.

-- Historic districts protected: This adds the cultural value of entire neighborhoods, such as the French Quarter, to the weighting procedure.

-- Archaeological sites protected: Another tool to measure support for cultural impacts of alternatives.

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