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State vows to buy property needed to close MR-GO

Official fears delay in work on channel

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Louisiana's coastal czar on Tuesday moved to break an apparent deadlock with the Army Corps of Engineers, sending a letter to a senior Army official committing the state to expediting the purchase of land needed to build a rock dike to close the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet at Bayou la Loutre in St. Bernard Parish.

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Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority Chairman Garret Graves said he decided to send the tersely worded letter to John Paul Woodley, assistant secretary of the Army for public works, after hearing that local corps officials had blamed the state for delays in signing an agreement with the corps on closing the controversial shipping channel, also known as the MR-GO.

"We have been waiting for them to sign the agreement, and we want to make that very clear," Graves said Tuesday night. "I don't know what kind of games they're playing. They're not going to hang any delay around our neck."

Accompanying the letter was the latest version of the memorandum of agreement between the corps and state, signed by Graves.

"The Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority is concerned that this confusion could lead to a delay in the closure and restoration of the MR-GO -- an unacceptable outcome," Graves wrote to Woodley.

The corps hopes to complete the closure by the beginning of the next hurricane season.

In the letter, Graves reiterated the state's position that the law authorizing the closure "establishes

that this work on the MR-GO is to be conducted at 'full federal expense' -- or at no cost to the parishes, levee districts or the state of Louisiana."

"In an effort to further expedite the closure and restoration effort, the CPRA has offered to provide assistance to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the acquisition of lands required for the closure structure," he wrote. "We remain committed to this voluntary action should the corps continue to determine that the CPRA remains capable of acquiring the lands, easements and right of way for the closure structure faster than the corps of engineers is able to acquire these assets."

He said the state is likely to offer the same assistance to the corps in acquiring land for ecosystem restoration, once the corps finishes a separate report outlining what the restoration will be.

The corps has received bids for building the closure dike, said Maj. Tim Kurgan, spokesman for the corps' New Orleans district office, and was awaiting the agreement to award the contract.

"If there's confusion between the state and the corps, that's unfortunate," Kurgan said. "As I understood it, the agreement was not signed, and we were concerned on our level that it needed to be signed quickly to move forward with closure.

"If the (memorandum of agreement) is signed, that's fantastic," he said.

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