Corps will close the MrGO sooner than expected

Posted by btheveno December 19, 2007 10:57AM

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U.S. Sen. David Vitter, R-La., announced today that the Army Corps of Engineers has agreed to an expedited plan for closing the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet.

The corps had been waiting for a specific Congressional allocation to close the channel, which will cost about $24 million. But Vitter said he has convinced the agency it can tap $75 million included in two earlier appropriations for operation and maintenance expenses to close it.

The agency will begin building an earthen dam across at Bayou la Loutre in St. Bernard Parish, effectively closing the controversial shipping channel, in about two or three months, allowing time for the selection of a contractor and for a Congressional mandate to close the channel to become law.

A month ago, the corps had submitted a report to Congress recommending deauthorization of the channel, derided as a "hurricane highway" for storm surge. But Congressional action on that report was pre-empted by the passage of the Water Resources Development Act, over the veto of President George W. Bush, which included a requirement that the channel be closed.

"In both the supplemental funding bills and WRDA, I have provided explicit provision to clear any ambiguity or delay regarding the corps immediate closure of the MR-GO," Vitter said in a news release issued Wednesday morning. "I look forward to the corps beginning this work as soon as possible and finally closing the hurricane highway."

Corps officials had no immediate comment on the announcement.

The earthen dam used to close the channel could eventually be raised higher and extended onto land along the bayou to act as a hurricane surge barrier. Mark Davis, a Tulane Law School professor and former executive director of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, said the corps may already have done enough to overcome any environmental hurdles represented by the closure.

At the same time it put together its deauthorization report, the corps completed a Legislative Environmental Impact Statement, for which it collected comments from the public.

A corps contractor also has put together a preliminary environmental assessment pinpointing potential chemical, oil and gas and other environmental threats in the area of the closure and elsewhere along the channel. That report will be part of a larger study aimed at supporting future plans for restoring wetlands and land along the channel.

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