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Several Louisiana hurricane projects lag

By Rick Jervis, USA TODAY

NEW ORLEANS — The push to protect the city from the next catastrophic storm is a massive undertaking — and the \$15 billion project is still facing some tough hurdles.

At least 13 projects in the massive hurricane protection system being built around the [New Orleans](#) area may not be ready by the 2011 deadline, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials say.

The undertaking that includes more than 350 miles of earthen levees, flood walls, pumps and storm barriers will be mostly finished to deliver 100-year protection by June 1, 2011, the start of that year's hurricane season, says Karen Durham-Aguilera, who is overseeing the project for the corps. The 100-year label refers to a system capable of protecting against a storm with a 1% chance of striking in any given year. Hurricane Katrina, which decimated the region in August 2005, was a 400-year storm.

Several projects have fallen behind schedule and will probably not make the deadline, Durham-Aguilera says. Nine of the 13 projects should be completed during the summer of 2011, she says. One of them — part of the effort to protect the area around Causeway Bridge in nearby [Metairie](#) — won't be finished until 2012.

Projects running behind include:

- The gate at the mouth of the Inner Harbor Navigational Canal in New Orleans.
- A section of the Chalmette Loop Levee in St. Bernard Parish.
- A section of the New Orleans East Back Levee.

Overall, work on the system is progressing at better-than-expected speeds and the area is safer than it was in 2005, Durham-Aguilera says. The federal levees collapsed under pressure from that storm, flooding New Orleans.

"We have to keep up this intense effort," Durham-Aguilera says. "But we're in far better shape than we were a year ago."

The \$15 billion system — a cost three times higher than the corps' entire national civil works budget — entails 350 construction contracts and the help of at least six other corps districts.

Legal wrangling over residents' property, environmental mitigation, changes in design and a litany of public meetings have slowed some of the projects. Corps engineers have held more than 130 public meetings since the start of the projects.

The showcase of the hurricane-protection system is a gigantic surge barrier being installed across the Inner Harbor Navigational Canal, where a massive wall of water rolled into eastern New Orleans and the Lower 9th Ward during the 2005 floods. The project, along with two other nearby projects, is more than \$500 million over budget and a segment of it may miss its deadline.

The agency says it intends to award 100 construction contracts this year. Only 12 have gone out, Durham-Aguilera says.

The urgency corps officials showed in the emotional months after Katrina, as engineers rebuilt the busted levees, seems to have waned, says Garret Graves, head of [Louisiana](#) Gov. [Bobby Jindal](#)'s Office of Coastal Activities. Today, more layers of bureaucracy weigh down the project's momentum, compared to the military-like execution of the early work, he says.

"As you get away from Louisiana to D.C., it is very clear you don't have the same level of urgency and the same understanding of the challenges being faced down here," says Graves, who has monitored the project on behalf of the state.

It's not only corps officials being accused of complacency. Many residents with properties abutting the levees, who just after Katrina scrambled to give the corps access, are now fighting the corps' right to access their property to work on the levees, says Timothy Doody of the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-East.

"We need the same urgency we all felt after Hurricane Katrina," Doody says. "We can't have the complacency we believe is settling in."

Even if the 100-year protection system gets done in the coming years, it likely won't protect New Orleans and the surrounding parishes from a direct hit from a large storm, says Mark Davis, director of Tulane University's Institute on Water Resources Law and Policy.


The federal government needs to continue building up to 300-year or 500-year storm protection, which was authorized by Congress after Hurricane Betsy battered the region in 1965, he says.

He says an integrated system of armored levees, surge barriers and coastal restoration is needed.

"This community had been promised a higher level of protection 40 years ago," Davis says. "That promise, in my view, still stands."

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