White House opposes Morganza levee project

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By Bill Walsh
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WASHINGTON -- The White House has quietly signaled its opposition to a 72-mile levee system in south Louisiana proposed to protect about 120,000 people who have watched the Gulf of Mexico creep ever closer to their homes as the coast erodes.

The Bush administration raises concerns about the $900 million project in a draft policy paper being circulated on Capitol Hill as the House of Representatives prepares to consider legislation that would authorize construction.

The president stopped short of threatening a veto. But his opposition could delay the long-awaited Water Resources Development Act or scuttle the snaking system of levees and floodgates that has been on the drawing board for 15 years to protect people and property in Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes.

"If this policy statement is allowed to stand, it will display a fundamental lack of understanding and commitment to crucial hurricane and flood protection in key parts of southeast Louisiana," Sen. David Vitter, R-La., wrote in a letter to the president. "I urge you in the strongest possible terms to correct this mistake."

An administration spokesman soft-pedaled its concerns about the so-called Morganza-to-the-Gulf project, saying the policy is still in draft form. A final version could be issued as early as next week if, as expected, the House takes up the water resources bill when it returns from recess.

"At this point, to say there is a concern is probably premature," said Sean Kevelighan, spokesman for the Office of Management and Budget. "The legislation is under review right now."

But a draft version of the administration's position was unequivocal. It called for deleting the Morganza project from the bill.

"The project requires reformulation based on an analysis that reflects recent storm data, substantial cost increases, and the effects of other levees proposed south of Houma, and that assesses how it would affect the limited options available for restoring the ecosystem of the Terrebonne Basin," the document says.

It also calls for reducing federal financing for broader coastal restoration to $500 million and forcing the state to pay 50 percent of the overall costs, which Vitter labeled "a raw deal for Louisiana." The Blanco administration has estimated that restoring the coast, which is eroding through manmade and natural forces at a rate of 30 square miles per year and lost an estimated 217 square miles because of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, would cost in excess of $14 billion.

In their draft policy statement, Bush administration officials say they support coastal restoration in Louisiana, but "we would encourage the House to instead enact a broad, more flexible authorization."

The Army Corps of Engineers began studying hurricane protection for Houma and the communities to the south in Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes in 1992. Plans were
drawn for a 72-mile earthen levee system, with 12 floodgates and a canal lock in Houma. It was intended to protect 120,000 residents of south Louisiana and 1,700 square miles of marshes, farmland, residential communities and industrial sites.

Terrebonne Parish passed a local sales tax to help foot the bill for the plan, which in 2006 was estimated to cost $886.7 million, according to the Corps of Engineers. Thirty-five percent is to be paid by local and state governments.

"If they continue to put this on hold, there won't be anything left of Terrebonne Parish to protect," Parish President Don Schwab said Tuesday. "Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes serve as a buffer to Jefferson and Orleans. We got to quit putting these things on hold. The president needs to bite the bullet."

But it's not just the administration that has raised questions about the levee project. Environmentalists for years have objected to building levees across south Louisiana's wetlands. Critics dubbed the project "The Great Wall of Louisiana." They said it would stop the natural flow of water through the coastal marshes and contribute to coastal erosion, a phenomenon that has made the entire region more vulnerable to hurricane storm surge.

Proponents of the massive levee building program have suggested so-called "leaky levees" that would permit the movement of tidal waters, but skeptics said the technology is unproven.

The nonprofit group Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana was among those opposing the plan on environmental grounds. Former coalition director Mark Davis, now a Tulane University professor, said he fears the Bush administration is seizing on environmental concerns to kill a project it doesn't want to pay for.

Davis said the administration hasn't raised similar objections to the Donaldsonville-to-the-Gulf levee project which, in his view, poses more substantial environmental hazards.

"If their concerns are technical, those can be worked out," Davis said. "If their concerns are budgetary, which concerns me most, then it's a more ominous signal that they aren't ready to commit to anything down here."

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It's because Bush doesn't know about levee protection, and he doesn't care about liberal-voting black people. If he had his way, New Orleans would be 90 percent RICH CONSERVATIVE white people by now

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