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Bonnet Carré to help raise hurricane levees

NEW ORLEANS—The Bonnet Carré Spillway’s primary purpose is to defend metro New Orleans against Mississippi River floods. Meanwhile, however, it plays a little-known role in hurricane defense.

Since 1985, the spillway has provided clay to build up dozens of nearby hurricane levees. The next excavation is expected to begin in April to provide more than 500,000 cubic yards to raise the levees in east St. Charles Parish. The job is expected to begin in May.

“The clay will be used to restore about eight of the 10 miles of levee from the spillway guide levee to the Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport to an average authorized height of 13 feet,” said Marti Lucore, a Corps project manager.

The remaining two miles of the east St. Charles levee is already under construction. The levee, begun in the 1990s, is being elevated because levees subside under their own weight and because subsidence occurs at multiple subsurface levels in south Louisiana.

Spillway also used to stockpile clay

This levee lies just north of Airline Highway to resist storm surges from Lake Pontchartrain to defend communities from Norco to Kenner, and oil refineries, chemical plants, a grain-export elevator and other businesses.

The spillway area to be mined has also been used recently to stockpile clay temporarily. This had led some drivers on Airline Highway to conclude mistakenly that the Corps is filling in the spillway. That role is left entirely to the river—which deposits sand and other sediment when

the spillway is operated to divert floodwater, said Chris Brantley, the spillway's operations manager.

"We need an estimated 90 million yards to raise hurricane levees through 2020," said April Villa, the Corps' project manager for borrow material. Villa said more clay is needed and urged landowners to contact the Corps at mvnborrow@mvn02.usace.army.mil or 504-862-CLAY.

Taxpayers already own Bonnet Carré

"To minimize the expense, the borrow areas should be as near as practicable to the levee projects," Villa said. "And, the taxpayers already own the Bonnet Carré clay and soil-test borings are already done, allowing the government to avoid these expenses."

The clay that will be mined for the levees must sometimes be almost twice the volume needed to elevate the levee, Villa said. The losses occur primarily in transport, placement and compaction.

The clay will be mined from a 42-acre rectangle of the spillway's 900-acre all-terrain vehicle (ATV) recreation area. It's bounded by Airline Highway (U.S. 61) and the Kansas City Southern Railway.

"The Corps is trying to minimize the impact by directing clay-hauling trucks to roads where access is easier, the haul route is shorter, and recreational visitors will be avoided," Brantley said.

"Upon completion of the excavation, these clay pits will be stocked with game fish in cooperation with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service," he said.

Villa said, "While we recognize the spillway's contributions to recreation and the quality of life in metro New Orleans, it is essential to rebuild the levees for defense against hurricanes. The clay mining will be done in a few months, while the levees will serve for lifetimes to come."

The Bonnet Carré Spillway was built in the 1930s to carry excess Mississippi River floodwaters seven miles north to Lake Pontchartrain. It has been opened eight times, the most recent in 1997.

Bonnet Carré brochure

Corps needs clay