



Highlights of [GAO-05-1050T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The greatest natural threat posed to the New Orleans area is from hurricane-induced storm surges, waves, and rainfalls. A hurricane surge that can inundate coastal lowlands is the most destructive characteristic of hurricanes and accounts for most of the lives lost from hurricanes. Hurricane surge heights along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts can exceed 20 feet. The effects of Hurricane Katrina flooded a large part of New Orleans and breached the levees that are part of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) Lake Pontchartrain, and Vicinity, Louisiana Hurricane Protection Project. This project, first authorized in 1965, was designed to protect the lowlands in the Lake Pontchartrain tidal basin from flooding by hurricane-induced sea surges and rainfall.

GAO was asked to provide information on (1) the purpose and history of the Lake Pontchartrain, and Vicinity, Louisiana Hurricane Protection Project and (2) funding of the project.

GAO is not making any recommendations in this testimony.

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To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Anu Mittal at (202) 512-3841 or mittala@gao.gov.

ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

Lake Pontchartrain and Vicinity Hurricane Protection Project

What GAO Found

Congress first authorized the Lake Pontchartrain and Vicinity, Louisiana Hurricane Protection Project in the Flood Control Act of 1965. The project was to construct a series of control structures, concrete floodwalls, and levees to provide hurricane protection to areas around Lake Pontchartrain. The project, when designed, was expected to take about 13 years to complete and cost about \$85 million. Although federally authorized, it was a joint federal, state, and local effort.

The original project designs were developed based on the equivalent of what is now called a fast-moving Category 3 hurricane that might strike the coastal Louisiana region once in 200-300 years. As GAO reported in 1976 and 1982, since the beginning of the project, the Corps has encountered project delays and cost increases due to design changes caused by technical issues, environmental concerns, legal challenges, and local opposition to portions of the project. As a result, in 1982, project costs had grown to \$757 million and the expected completion date had slipped to 2008. None of the changes made to the project, however, are believed to have had any role in the levee breaches recently experienced as the alternative design selected was expected to provide the same level of protection. In fact, Corps officials believe that flooding would have been worse if the original proposed design had been built. When Hurricane Katrina struck, the project, including about 125 miles of levees, was estimated to be from 60-90 percent complete in different areas with an estimated completion date for the whole project of 2015. The floodwalls along the drainage canals that were breached were complete when the hurricane hit.

The current estimated cost of construction for the completed project is \$738 million with the federal share being \$528 million and the local share \$210 million. Federal allocations for the project were \$458 million as of the enactment of the fiscal year 2005 federal appropriation. This represents 87 percent of the federal government's responsibility of \$528 million with about \$70 million remaining to complete the project. Over the last 10 fiscal years (1996-2005), federal appropriations have totaled about \$128.6 million and Corps reprogramming actions resulted in another \$13 million being made available to the project. During that time, appropriations have generally declined from about \$15-20 million annually in the earlier years to about \$5-7 million in the last three fiscal years. While this may not be unusual given the state of completion of the project, the Corps' project fact sheet from May 2005 noted that the President's budget request for fiscal years 2005 and 2006, and the appropriated amount for fiscal year 2005 were insufficient to fund new construction contracts. The Corps had also stated that it could spend \$20 million in fiscal year 2006 on the project if the funds were available. The Corps noted that several levees had settled and needed to be raised to provide the level of protection intended by the design.