



Corps Hurricane Response

Task Force Hope Status Report

March 16, 2007

Corps of Engineers answers FAQs on MRGO

Misconceptions and misunderstandings surround Mississippi River Gulf Outlet since Hurricane Katrina

By Susan Spaht

When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in August 2005, the New Orleans metropolitan area suffered a great deal of flooding and wind damage. St. Bernard Parish was one of the hardest hit areas.

Some people believe that the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO) served as a "hurricane highway" and was a direct cause of undue flooding in St. Bernard Parish. Many residents and some elected officials have called for the immediate closing of the MRGO; some want it plugged up; some want it filled in.

Yet, others depend on the MRGO for commercial navigation and for recreational and commercial fishing and shrimping. Most users of the MRGO value it as an easier, quicker outlet to the Gulf.

Since Hurricane Katrina, questions about the MRGO abound: Why did the Corps of Engineers build the outlet in the first place? Who uses MRGO? Is it a threat during hurricanes? What will be the fate of MRGO? And who will decide?

The Corps of Engineers answers some of your questions here.



In this pre-Katrina photo, a deep-draft ship steams its way from New Orleans to the Gulf of Mexico in the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, while a shrimp boat heads north in MRGO toward New Orleans. (USACE Photo)

1. Where did the idea for a Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO) come from?

Alternate routes for outlets from the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico have been investigated in the interest of sea-going navigation from time to time for over a century. Corps records show that a ship canal was considered as far back as 1852 in a report to Congress.

In the 1940s, officials with the Port of New Orleans, as well as local and nationally elected officials, requested that the federal government build a shorter navigation route from New Orleans to the Gulf of Mexico. These leaders, along with the Louisiana Legislature, envisioned two purposes for this channel. It

would serve as a safer, quicker route to the Gulf, and it would expand the navigation capabilities of the area. Their vision included expanded port facilities and a new **Centroport**, a vast, import/export complex complete with warehousing, a cargo airport, and road and rail connections. The Centroport was planned for the area that is now the north and south shores of the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway (GIWW) in the Almonaster-Michoud area in both Orleans and St. Bernard Parishes, as well as the area on the west side of the MRGO in St. Bernard Parish.

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The Louisiana Legislature of 1944 officially empowered the Governor of Louisiana (Jimmy Davis) "to aid and assist the federal government in obtaining and completing...a tidewater canal from New Orleans to the Gulf on the eastern side of the Mississippi River..." The U.S. Congress authorized channel construction through the River and Harbor Act of 1956, and authorized it to be built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Construction began in 1958 and concluded 10 years later. It was named the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO).

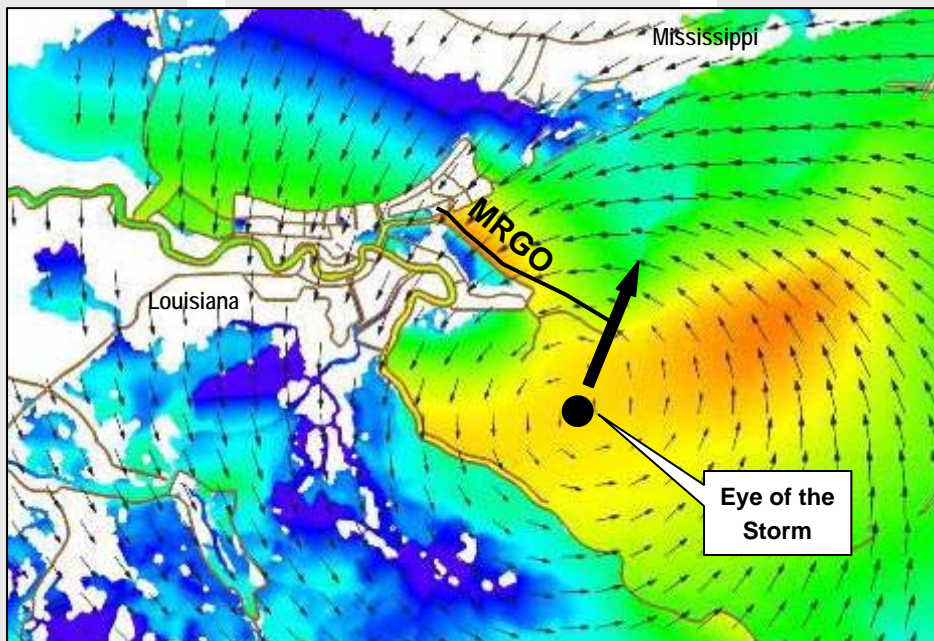
Note: The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, by law, must receive authorization and funding from the U.S. Congress to proceed with any construction project. And all Corps projects must be signed into law by the President of the United States. The normal process involves local officials requesting a project (usually with shared funding) from the federal government. Local sponsorship of a project is required. If approved, Congress provides the funding then authorizes the Corps of Engineers to proceed. This is a very complicated and regulated process. To better understand how this process works, go to this links:

<http://www.mvn.usace.army.mil/hps/Status%20Report%20Newsletters/September28.pdf>

In a 1956 editorial, *The Times-Picayune* newspaper fully endorsed the plan for the MRGO:

"For more than a decade civic leaders of

the Mississippi valley have urged building of a tidewater channel from New Orleans to the Gulf of Mexico. This worthy project was moved closer to realization Wednesday when the public works committee of the United States Senate, without a dissenting vote, approved legislation to authorize the channel...The new channel, of course, will serve two fine purposes. It will provide a shorter, less hazardous route from New Orleans to the open sea. It will make possible expansion of the port by providing additional water-frontage where industrial plants and more wharves can be



This IPET computer illustration (approx. 7:10 a.m., Aug. 29, 2005) shows Hurricane Katrina's storm surge and winds (arrows) moving across the MRGO from the east in a counter clockwise motion from the eye. The storm surge and waves inundated levees along the MRGO and surrounding area. (IPET Illustration)

built....Spearheading the effort has been the New Orleans Tidewater Development Association, with full co-operation from the Louisiana delegation in Congress and legislators from many other states."

2. Did anyone consider the environmental implications when the outlet was built?

Yes. Prior to and during construction of the MRGO, the Corps of Engineers conducted or participated in numerous studies which included environmental considerations of the effects of digging the

channel.

One of these was the "Pre-Construction Study of the Fisheries of the Estuarine Areas Traversed by the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet Project" by George A. Rounsefell, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The principal aim of this study "was to determine the environmental and biological conditions prevailing prior to channel construction from the fishery standpoint." The study included hydrographic and biological observations, water temperature, oxygen values, turbidity readings, salinity, currents and biological sampling.

Also, in the Corps of Engineers' publication "Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet, Design Memorandum No. 2, General Design, June 1959", the Corps documented a variety of investigations made subsequent to project authorization.

These investigations, funded in

fiscal year 1957, included soil borings, salinity sampling and testing, fish and wildlife studies, wave direction and velocity and tide studies, etc.

It should be noted that during the time the MRGO was built, between 1958 – 1968, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) was not in existence: NEPA was passed in 1969. In construction of the MRGO, the Corps of Engineers followed all federal, state and local regulations in place at that time. The Corps of Engineers will not proceed with any con-

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struction project until that project is in compliance with all environmental requirements.

3. Didn't the MRGO cause the extensive flooding in St. Bernard Parish when Hurricane Katrina hit the area?

While the Army Corps of Engineers is still investigating the causes of flooding, two independent studies have been published that examine the effects of Hurricane Katrina on the MRGO.

A 2006 study by the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources found that the southeast – northwest channel of the MRGO from the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway (GIWW) to the Gulf of Mexico does not contribute significantly to peak storm surge during severe storms where the wetland system is overwhelmed with water, and that closure in this section of the channel will not provide significant, direct mitigation of severe hurricane storm surge.

An investigation by the Interagency Performance Evaluation Task Force (IPET) reached the same conclusion in a draft final report.* According to the IPET draft final report on the Performance Evaluation of the New Orleans and Southeast Louisiana Hurricane Protection System, storm surge animations and post-Katrina aerial photos indicate that storm surge from Hurricane Katrina built first from the winds out of the east prior to landfall, with subsequent winds coming from the southeast, then from the south as the storm made landfall and tracked just east of New Orleans.

Computer models from the report show Katrina on a north by northeast course following landfall on Louisiana's southeastern tip moving toward the Mississippi coast, with counter-clockwise winds causing an enormous water surge (topped with waves) moving at angles nearly perpendicular to the long MRGO channel section (see IPET computer illustration on page 2). These findings

appear to indicate that storm surge and waves that inundated levees along the MRGO and surrounding area would have come from Lake Borgne instead of up the channel from the Gulf of Mexico.

**<https://ipet.wes.army.mil>*

***see IPET report Vol IV for water levels and wave conditions*

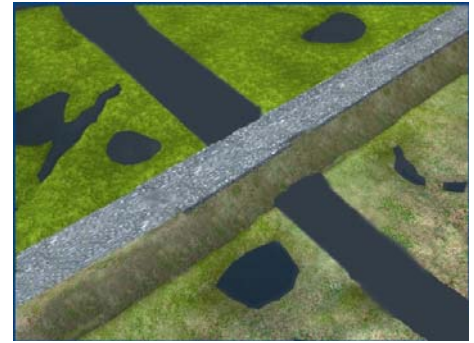
4. Why doesn't the Corps of Engineers just close the MRGO?

The Corps cannot act on its own; it takes direction from the U.S. Congress and the President of the United States. Since congressionally-authorized projects must be **de-authorized** by Congress, closing the MRGO requires authorization and appropriations for closure from Congress.

Note: please see the Process link in Question 1

5. Who uses the MRGO?

- Shallow-draft and deep-draft navigation vessels carrying a wide variety of commodities, including petroleum products, chemicals, forest products, manufactured goods, food and farm products, and machinery.
- Statistical data shows that use of the MRGO steadily increased in terms of tonnage until its peak in 1978; and in terms of number of vessels, it peaked in 1982. In the last 20 years, use of the MRGO has generally been decreasing.
- Some of the oil and gas industry relies on the MRGO to service offshore oil platforms in the Gulf of Mexico.
- Recreational and commercial fishermen use the MRGO to reach the Gulf of Mexico. Some shrimpers



This is an illustration of what the proposed armored earthen dam could look like over the MRGO at Bayou La Loutre. (USACE Illustration)

and fishermen fish directly in the MRGO.

- NASA's Michoud Assembly Plant regularly sends its external propellant tanks aboard a special barge through the MRGO enroute to Florida. (*Note: NASA is not dependent on the MRGO; they can use the GIWW also.*)
- At its height, the MRGO container ship traffic had a higher dollar value than bulk cargo ships using the Mississippi River. However, prior to Hurricane Katrina, the Port of New Orleans relocated all of its container terminals to the Napoleon Avenue wharf on the Mississippi River.
- A key element on the outcome of the MRGO will be the fate of inland (towboat and barge) traffic. The MRGO and Baptiste Collette Bayou together form the preferred alternative route for the eastbound Gulf Intracoastal Waterway if, for some reason, the Inner Harbor Navigational Canal (IHNC) is closed. However, the need for this alternative route is infrequent.

6. Didn't Congress authorize and provide funds for the Corps of Engineers to close the MRGO?

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No. Following Hurricane Katrina, Congress passed Public Law 109-234, the Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act for Defense, the Global War on Terror, and Hurricane Recovery, 2006, which reads in part:

"...the Secretary of the Army, acting through the Chief of Engineers...shall develop a comprehensive plan...to de-authorize deep-draft navigation on the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, Louisiana...and submit an interim report to Congress" by December 2006...The plan shall include recommended modifications to the existing use of the Outlet, including what navigation functions, if any, should be maintained and any measures for hurricane and storm protection..."

In response to Congressional direction, the Corps conducted a series of public forums to identify various plans and proposals for the future of the MRGO. Meetings included technical presentations and open discussions on topics including wetlands, navigation, storm protection, and the local economy. An independent team of technical experts was chartered to review the results.

The Corps of Engineers presented its **MRGO Deep-Draft De-Authorization Interim Report** to Congress in December. To read the full report, go to this website:

http://www.mvn.usace.army.mil/PAO/RELEASES/MRGO_Report_Congress_061214_Final.pdf

A fully developed and coordinated de-authorization plan will be incorporated into the Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration Report (LaCPR), due to Congress in Dec. 2007.

7. What did the Corps' Interim Report recommend?

"The Interim Report does not contain a final recommendation for construction or de-authorization but does identify a preliminary assessment for further evalua-

CEQ approves Alternative Arrangements for NEPA Compliance

Corps planning to move forward expeditiously

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) has approved a proposal by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) through alternative arrangements for select elements of the New Orleans hurricane protection system.

The Corps and CEQ held four public meetings to seek citizen comment on the proposed alternative arrangements. Comments from citizens at the meetings strongly supported the alternative approach.

The approved alternative arrangements provide for Individual Environmental Reports that will examine the impacts of select groups of proposed projects included in the 100-year level of hurricane protection authorized and funded by the Administration and Congress. The Corps will examine the cumulative impacts of the proposed actions on a continuing basis, culminating in a Comprehensive Environmental

Document. The alternative arrangements will allow decisions on smaller groups of proposed projects to move forward sooner than under the traditional NEPA process.

The Corps considers improvements to levees, floodwalls and other hurricane protection features to be critical to the future economic vitality of New Orleans.

Compliance with NEPA through alternative arrangements supports the Corps' ongoing commitment to environmental stewardship while maintaining its determination to provide hurricane protection to the area in an expeditious manner.

Opportunities for public comment will continue throughout the alternative arrangement process. Plans call for nine public meetings; see inset for dates.

NEPA Public Meetings

All meetings start at 7:00 p.m. and conclude at 9:00 p.m.

March 27, 2007 Lake Cataouatche Sub-Basin: Lake Cataouatche/Jefferson Parish, Dougie V's Restaurant, Banquet Hall, 13899 River Road, Luling, LA

March 28, 2007 Harvey-Westwego Sub-Basin: Westwego City Council Chamber, 419 Avenue A, Westwego, LA

March 29, 2007 St. Charles Parish Sub-Basin: American Legion Hall, Post 366, 12188 River Road, St. Rose, LA

April 3, 2007 Gretna-Algiers Sub-Basin: Our Lady of Holy Cross College, 4123 Woodland Drive, New Orleans, LA

April 4, 2007 Chalmette Loop Sub-Basin: 8201 West Judge Perez Road, Chalmette, LA

April 5, 2007 Jefferson East Bank Sub-Basin: Jefferson Parish Regional Library, 4747 W. Napoleon Avenue, Metairie, LA

April 10, 2007 Belle Chasse Sub-Basin: Belle Chasse Auditorium, 8398 Highway 23, Belle Chasse, LA


April 11, 2007 New Orleans East Sub-Basin: Avalon Hotel & Conference Center, 830 Conti Street, New Orleans, LA

April 12, 2007 Orleans East Bank Sub-Basin: National WWII Museum, 945 Magazine Street, New Orleans, LA



For detailed information on the NEPA Alternative Arrangements, go to this site: <http://www.mvn.usace.army.mil>

tion..."according to John Paul Woodley, Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civic Works. However, the report does suggest closure of the MRGO channel to **both** shallow and deep-draft navigation by an armored, earthen dam just south of Bayou La Loutre near Hopedale, La. The

Corps must also comply with a federal law requiring the agency to weigh the environmental effects of the closure decision (i.e. NEPA). The official recommendation will be included in the LaCPR Technical Report to Congress due in Dec. 2007. 

Faces of Hope

LaRFO employees receive Army's prestigious Humanitarian Service Award

**Department of the Army
Civilian Award for
Humanitarian Service**

"This award consists of a medal, lapel button, and certificate... This award is for individuals who have distinguished themselves by meritorious direct "hands-on" participation in an act or operation of a humanitarian nature directed toward an individual or groups of individuals. Documentation must provide evidence which substantiates on site participation in a humanitarian act or operation.

"Nominations should cover a period of service during which the individual performed significant humanitarian actions, deeds, or achievements..."

By Dick Devlin, La-RFO

Four Cameron Parish debris team members received the Department of the Army Civilian Award for Humanitarian Service last week at the Louisiana Recovery Field Office (LA-RFO) in New Orleans.

The award is equivalent to the Department of Defense's Humanitarian Service Medal used to recognize military members for life and property saving actions. The presentation was made by Michael Park, the LA-RFO's director.

The award recipients were recognized for their attention to detail and quick reaction on May 4, 2006, in saving the life of a truck driver delivering debris to the Wilkerson landfill in Cameron Parish in southwest Louisiana.



These LaRFO employees were recent recipients of the Army's Humanitarian Award for saving a man's life. They are, from left, are Justin Bult, Robert McKechnie, LaRFO Director Mike Park, Debra Christie and Yvette Young. (USACE Photo by Dick Devlin)

Award recipients were:

- **Justin Bult**, a Lake Charles Corps contract recovery employee
- **Debra Christie**, a Tulsa natural resources specialist and mission volunteer
- **Robert McKechnie**, a Detroit lock and dam mechanic and mission volunteer
- **Yvett Young**, a Sweet Lake Corps contract recovery employee


According to on-scene medical personnel, had the team not taken immediate action to treat the victim for heat stroke on site, the driver would certainly have perished.

The team had just completed safety training that week in which heat-related conditions, symptoms, and actions to be taken were covered by the local Safety Office. A heat stress fact sheet and OSHA quick card had been stapled to the wall of the tower.

The team, to a person, credited their recent training with helping them make the right decisions in dealing with the emergency.

The driver had stopped at the site's control tower after changing a flat tire in the dump when the tower monitor team noticed he was exhibiting the signs of heat stroke.

The quality assurance team swung into action, wetting down paper towels with ice and ice water from one of their coolers to help cool the driver. They provided available fluids and asked about medications and medical conditions.

After being treated by on-scene and hospital medical teams, the driver was released to go back to work two days later. The driver made a complete recovery. 

For more information on the LA-RFO mission, please visit www.faceofthecorps.com

Pump Capacity Report

17th Street Canal.....4,060 cfs
London Avenue Canal....2,800 cfs
Orleans Avenue Canal... 2,200 cfs

As of March 13, 2007

Note: The Status Report Newsletter will give weekly reports on the pump capacity of the three temporary outfall canals under construction. For more details, please visit this Web site:

www.mvn.usace.army.mil/hps/

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The *Status Report Newsletter* supports the information program for Task Force Hope and its stakeholders. It also serves as the primary tool for accurately transmitting the hurricane recovery work to stakeholders.

This is an online publication and open to public distribution.

This issue and past issues can be found at:

www.mvn.usace.army.mil/hps

Comments and questions may be sent to the

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Status Report Newsletter

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As of Feb. 23, 2007

Nearly 12 Million cubic yards of debris removed from Orleans Parish

***That much debris would fill the Louisiana Superdome
two and a half times.***

(Photo courtesy Louisiana Superdome)



An unprecedented volume of debris created by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita is being removed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers under the direction of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

In Orleans Parish alone, the Corps contractors have removed 11.9 million cubic yards of debris from streets and properties. That much debris would fill the Louisiana Superdome two and a half times.

Debris removal has reached an important milestone. With less than 1 million cubic yards remaining, the curbside and private property debris removal program is 94 percent complete in Orleans Parish.

"Debris removal operations are progressing toward completion," said Michael Park, director of the Corps' Louisiana Field Recovery Office (LaRFO). "Of an estimated 12.6 million cubic yards assigned to us by FEMA, we've removed 11.9 million. This is an incredible accomplishment of a strong federal, state and local

partnership."

During peak operations in Oct. 2005, the Corps' contractors were removing about 80,000 cubic yards per day. Current collections figures for curbside and private property debris removal are averaging 10,000 cubic yards per day. A large percentage of the remaining volume will come from an estimated 4,700 houses remaining to be gutted.

FEMA, the Corps of Engineers and city sanitation officials are urging citizens to move all their storm-related debris to the curbside for pick up. The Corps will continue to pick up curbside debris until Aug. 29, 2007.

To expedite removal, residents should separate the debris into white goods, hazardous waste, electronics, and construction debris.

Debris removal from private property is an important part of the Corps' mission. Crews are working seven days a week to accomplish this monumental task. 