

Science stronger, corps chief asserts

He says agency can stand up to politics

By Sheila Grissett
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Members of the environmental nonprofit group Corps Reform Network listen as Maj. Gen. Don Riley, second in command of the Army Corps of Engineers, speaks Tuesday in New Orleans.

STAFF PHOTO BY ELIOT KAMENITZ

An Army Corps of Engineers chief said Tuesday that the agency has a bounty of science and technology to defend its choices for hurricane protection projects against any political pressure that might be brought to bear.

Computer-driven, risk-based assessments make it possible to compare potential hurricane protection projects on the basis of how much each will reduce the risk of flooding, and at what cost to taxpayers, Maj. Gen. Don Riley said.

That wasn't the case years ago when the corps lost a battle to build butterfly gates at the mouths of the 17th Street, London Avenue and Orleans Avenue canals in New Orleans to stop hurricane-driven storm surges from Lake Pontchartrain.

"We proposed gates, and local citizens said no, fearing flooding (from) rainfall," Riley said during a meeting with the environmental nonprofit group Corps Reform Network this week in New Orleans. "We thought the greater risk was from storm surge -- feet instead of inches."

As a result, the corps abandoned the prospect of gates and instead built floodwalls along the three big outfall canals, two of which breached during Hurricane Katrina and contributed to catastrophic flooding and death.

Had the corps been equipped 15 years ago with the sophisticated risk tools being developed today, Riley said, gates might have trumped floodwalls.

"If we had to do that again, I'd say, 'Here's the risk of flooding from rainfall, and here's the risk of flooding from (storm surge),' " Riley said in response to a network member who asked what corps leaders can do if "politically pushed" to favor a less favorable project. "I'd lay it out for the (local) folks and then for the Congress and then for the public."

On an unrelated matter, Riley also said Tuesday that his agency takes seriously the allegations in a 42-page ethics complaint lodged last month by University of California-Berkeley civil engineering research professor Ray Seed.

In a confidential letter filed with the American Society of Civil Engineers Seed's complaint alleged that specific members of the trade association colluded with some corps employees and associates in an attempt to refute an independent forensic investigation Seed led into the hurricane protection system's failures during Katrina.

Seed also alleged that the corps-sponsored task force that probed Katrina failures produced flawed results that absolved the corps of its full measure of blame. More importantly, Seed said, the results of that investigation are leading the corps to make mistakes in the rebuilding of levees and floodwalls.

Riley said that allegation most concerns him and corps chief Lt. Gen. Robert Van Antwerp.

Riley said Van Antwerp, who missed Tuesday's meeting because of the death of a family friend, is in the process of writing to ask Seed to meet with him as soon as possible and disclose any knowledge he has regarding the safety of the system.

Riley said nothing in Seed's complaint provides specific information about any public safety failings.

"But if he has anything like this, we need to hear it quickly," he said. "We're asking him to come and give us specifics."

In the meantime, Riley said the corps is internally reviewing Seed's complaint, and the ASCE is conducting its own investigation.

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