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# Army Corps Team Has “Eye” on New Orleans Safety:

## Hurricane Season 2009

By Dr. JoAnne Castagna

The day Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, Louisiana, in 2005, a program manager with the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), North Atlantic Division, was in his office reviewing the region’s flood risk management projects online. Little did he know that in the near future, he and his fledgling coastal storm damage team would be asked to travel to New Orleans to see Katrina’s devastation firsthand and perform a safety assurance review, ensuring that the Corps’s rebuilding

efforts would make the region safer for the citizens of New Orleans.

When the 2009 hurricane season began in the Atlantic in June 2009, New Orleans residents were less vulnerable than they were the day after Katrina, due to the rebuilding efforts. However, they are still at some risk, even though the rebuilding has been moving aggressively forward by the Corps’s New Orleans District and the Hurricane Protection Office. Both organizations are being led by Task Force Hope, an arm of the Corps’s Mississippi Valley Division. Task Force Hope is on a tight deadline to get more than 200 designs and build storm damage risk-reduction features—to be up and running by 2011—that include hurricane barriers, floodwalls, levees, and pumping stations.

Task Force Hope asked the National Planning Center of Expertise for Coastal Storm Damage Reduction team to provide their review services, including a safety assurance review. This group is one of six national planning centers of expertise that USACE created to provide specialized services to the entire Corps. The team provides USACE personnel and non-USACE agencies throughout the world advice and resources on all aspects of coastal planning, including coastal storm damage reduction, regional sediment management, and affiliated ecosystem restoration water resource needs.

One of the main services the team provides is leading independent external peer reviews (performed by a panel of experts outside of USACE and gathered by an outside scientific agency) and agency technical reviews (performed by USACE personnel not associated with the projects being reviewed). The reviews are regarded as important, since they provide the public assurance that additional scrutiny is involved in their safety issues.





**New Orleans West Bank floodwall—part of Task Force Hope’s risk-reduction efforts**

Katrina became a Category 5 hurricane just hours before making landfall and unleashing the highest storm surge on record in the United States. After Katrina hit land, a team was still just being formed—but when the Corps was called on ultimately for planning services, forty of their best specialists throughout the nation were immediately flown to New Orleans, where they had to “hit the ground running.” A program manager with the Corps’s Baltimore District pointed out that the safety assurance review their team is doing is being performed by an independent external peer review panel. By law, USACE is required to perform safety assurance reviews for flood damage reduction and coastal projects. This review is ensuring that Task Force Hope’s original evaluation in their designs and construction assumptions and decisions remains a good solution, as new information is gained and adjustments to the design and construction are made. The only ongoing safety assurance review currently being conducted in USACE is the one for Task Force Hope.

When Task Force Hope completes its work, according to the Corps’s Baltimore District, the entire USACE will benefit by its declared advantages from the safety assurance reviews by an independent external peer review panel, including—

- Ensuring robust, resilient, and reliable USACE projects from planning through design and construction.
- Assessing and reassessing assumptions from earlier project phases once more actual data becomes available during the design and construction phases.
- Making best use of project time and money, especially when dealing with changeable areas on a project. For

example, some projects may have to switch from one type of flood risk reduction method to another—such as from using a levee to using a floodwall or switching to using a nonstandard type of protection such as an extra large pump station.

- Assuring the public that “another set of eyes” is used in conducting project reviews that pertain to their safety.

The Corps’s North Atlantic Division has noted that the team’s level of support to the mission has been “tremendous.” By making themselves available through vacations and holidays, the Corps has shown that their support wasn’t just a job for them, but rather wanting to be part of the effort to help the citizens of New Orleans. There is pride in working on what is currently the largest civil works mission for USACE. Additionally, the safety assurance review will provide for improved risk reduction to the New Orleans area, since if storm surges similar in strength to those created by Hurricane Katrina are produced, there will be a lower risk of loss of life and infrastructure damage to homes and businesses.

To learn more about the USACE National Planning Center of Expertise for Coastal Storm Damage Reduction and the services it provides to the Corps, visit [www.nad.usace.army.mil/natplan.html](http://www.nad.usace.army.mil/natplan.html).



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