

Acknowledge existence of levees, Missouri and Illinois senators tell FEMA

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Illinois' and Missouri's U.S. senators are among a bipartisan group of senators asking the Federal Emergency Management Agency to acknowledge the existence of levees that protect flood plains around the country, including parts of three Metro East counties.

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., said FEMA designates the flood plains as "without levee," essentially ignoring — for purposes of modeling — the existence of levees that do exist. Durbin said the method reduces the precision of flood maps and erodes public confidence in the mapping process.

He said it also "may be unnecessarily devaluing property and hurting the economies of cities, towns, counties and businesses."

Sen. Mark Kirk, R-Ill., said, "We know these levees exist, which is why I'm asking FEMA to take them into account."

Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., and Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., were also among senators who signed a letter to FEMA Administrator W. Craig Fugate.

Massive earthen levees built in the 1940s and 1950s protect the Mississippi River flood plain in Madison, St. Clair and Monroe counties that is called the American Bottom and is home to more than 150,000 people, more than 7,000 businesses and more than 50,000 jobs.

None of the levees has ever failed, but there has been increased concern about seepage under the levees since the record flood of 1993.

FEMA announced in 2007 that it would reclassify most of the flood plain as high-risk because the Army Corps of Engineers would not certify that the levees would withstand a 100-year flood, though they were designed to protect against a 500-year flood.

The map changes would place new restrictions on development and force many business and home owners to purchase costly flood insurance.

Officials of the three counties have mounted a joint effort to correct the levee deficiencies at a cost of about \$129.5 million. The work, financed by a temporary quarter-cent sales tax, is expected to be completed in two to three years.

Les Serman, chief supervisor of the Southwestern Illinois Flood Prevention District, said FEMA officials expect to make the revised maps final in February 2012. The district was established by the counties to undertake the levee improvements.

Some areas in St. Charles County may also be affected by pending flood map changes.

