



Illinois levee repair compliance could add costs, cause delay

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COLLINSVILLE • A twist in the planning to reinforce Metro East levees could add millions of dollars to the cost and potentially exact an economic toll of hundreds of millions, the project's top official, Les Sterman, warned Wednesday.

Sterman said he had learned that the Army Corps of Engineers, which oversees the Mississippi River levee system, will require a "Section 408" permit that local officials did not think applied to them.

He is chief supervisor for the Southwestern Illinois Flood Prevention District Council, formed to raise money to fix levee problems that otherwise threaten to stifle development in the American Bottom and force landowners to buy costly flood insurance.

"As you know, this lengthy process is exactly what we are choosing to avoid by funding the project with local monies," Sterman said in a memo to his board.

He complained that the Section 408 process "includes lengthy and costly internal and external reviews and the preparation of significant additional documentation." He said it is "inappropriate, wasteful and redundant," and "entirely unacceptable."

Joseph Kellett, deputy district engineer of the corps' St. Louis District, tried to tamp down the concerns at the district's board meeting Wednesday morning, saying he does not envision a significant delay.

"Give us 30 days," Kellett said. "We've already been moving within the spirit of that law. Much of the data-gathering has already taken place."

Sterman remained skeptical. "This is the biggest threat we have to this project, period," he told the board.

The meeting did hear good news from Jay Martin of AMEC Earth & Environmental Inc., the firm designing the levee improvements. He said the company now projects that construction costs will be about \$30 million less than an earlier estimate of \$160 million. The design work is 30 percent complete. Officials hope to complete the project in 2015.

That may not take into account discussions with corps staff indicating the agency will require the same planning and development as if it were doing the work itself.

At issue is a requirement to show that the work would not be "injurious to the public interest." Sterman said it is aimed at preventing alterations that would lessen the levees' effectiveness.

Because the Metro East project is designed to make the levees stronger than ever, Sterman said, "it's illogical to apply this requirement in our situation."

Illinois officials are sensitive to delays because they have been fighting to get the Federal Emergency Management Agency to push back issuance of new maps that would designate much of the flood plain as "high-risk." That came after the corps would not certify that the existing levees would withstand a 100-year flood.

A high-risk designation would severely limit development and force property owners to buy expensive flood insurance. The updated maps are expected sometime next year.

Faced with that consequence, officials in Madison, St. Clair and Monroe counties banded together to establish the flood prevention district and levy a quarter-cent sales tax to finance the levee makeovers. Tax collection began in January 2009.

In November, the district and some other Metro East governmental units sued FEMA, claiming that the agency cannot justify de-accrediting the levees and that it disregarded corps reports saying the existing levees will "perform as expected."

Recently, FEMA responded to pressure from lawmakers to take the existence of current levees into account in updating the flood maps. Previously, the agency model ignored them altogether.

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Counting the locally maintained levees and those operated directly by the corps, a 74-mile system protects the American Bottom, a flood plain that is home to more than 150,000 people, more than 7,000 businesses and more than 50,000 jobs. It includes all or parts of numerous communities, including Alton, Cahokia, Centreville, East Alton, East St. Louis, Granite City, Hartford, Roxana, Sauget and Wood River.

The levees were built with federal funding in the 1940s and '50s to protect against a 500-year flood. They have never failed, but the Corps of Engineers has become increasingly concerned about underseepage — water that finds its way under and behind the levees and can cause their failure.