

'Critical Paths' Are Those Which Cause Most Damage

In September, 1974, Hurricane Carmen came roaring out of the Gulf of Mexico, heading straight for New Orleans.

At almost the last moment, the storm veered to the west and slammed into south central Louisiana, wreaking havoc with that area's valuable sugar cane crop. But if Carmen had continued her northerly path — and it was apparently only chance which caused her to turn — she would have devastated the New Orleans area by following one of those "critical paths" we have heard so much about.

U.S. Corps of Engineers officials said shortly after the storm that if Carmen had continued north and her eye had passed over the western part of Lake Pontchartrain, a wall of water up to 12 feet high would have inundated the north shore. Additionally, parts of eastern New Orleans would have been severely flooded by waters from Lake Borgne.

But this would have been only one of several "critical paths" which exist for the area around Lake Pontchartrain. If, for example, the storm had turned northeast and passed over Lake Borgne, flood tides would have been driven into Lake Pontchartrain, and New Orleans and East Jefferson would have been flooded.

A critical path, then, is simply a path for any hurricane which would be most damaging to a particular section of the area.

Another "critical" hurricane type has been termed the standard project hurricane by the U.S. Corps of Engineers.

Damage from such a storm, the Corps said, is that which "may be expected from the most severe meteorological conditions that can be considered reasonably characteristic of a given region."

And "reasonably characteristic" excludes storms of such rare intensity and power as Camille, which devastated the Mississippi Gulf Coast in 1969.

Guy LeMieux, president of the Orleans Levee Board, said one U.S. Weather Service expert estimated that if Camille had hit 35 miles farther west than it did, that up to 50,000 persons could have drowned in New Orleans, both because of its being on a critical path and its extraordinary intensity.

It is to protect from such devastation that LeMieux said he is seeking to implement a Corps of Engineers hurricane protection plan which would utilize locks and barriers at Chef Menteur Pass, the Rigolets and the Seabrook Bridge area.

The barriers plan has come in for much criticism and opposition.

The Corps and Levee Board thinking is that a Standard Project Hurricane on a critical path would push such a mass of water into Lake Pontchartrain through the passes that both the north shore and south shore would be severely flooded. The best way to prevent such devastation, the agencies say, is to construct the barriers so that when a storm threatens the area, the barrier locks could be closed, keeping the storm-driven waters out of the lake.

Opponents claim that the barriers would seriously disturb the ecology and marine life of the lake, crippling area fishing. Others believe the barriers could not keep massive storm tides out of the lake anyway, and some north shore residents fear that storm tides, piling up outside the barriers, would be forced into their area through the Pearl River and other waterways.

Save Our Wetlands Inc. (SOWL), an environmental group, has filed suit in federal court against the barriers and the case may come before the court toward the end of this year.

The barriers project is part of an overall plan called the Lake Pontchartrain and Vicinity Hurricane Protection Plan, a \$300 million, 10-year project, to be financed on a 70 per cent federal — 30 per cent local basis.

LeMieux said approximately \$100 million of the \$300 million has been spent, mostly in raising and improving levees. LeMieux said that because of the work done so far, if a storm identical to Betsy were to strike this year, that no severe flooding would occur in New Orleans. But Betsy, he said, was not on a critical path.

The barriers plan is the key to the whole project, LeMieux said, and is also the most controversial.

Two years ago a three-mill tax issue was passed to finance the local share of the plan, but the barriers project was not included in the issue. LeMieux said he told the people that the millage money would not be used for anything environmentally controversial.

LeMieux said in an interview last week that he meant at the time, opposition from a responsible state or federal agency, "but I didn't mean just any environmental group." No state or federal agency opposes the plan, he said.

Then, LeMieux continued, U.S. Rep. F. Edward Hebert succeeded in having a bill passed which, in effect, allows local flood dollars to be used twice. For every dollar the Levee Board spends on flood protection, LeMieux said, the Levee Board gets a dollar in credit from the Corps of Engineers.

Thus it is now economically feasible to include the barriers project and LeMieux is eager to get the work under way.

The Levee Board and the Corps maintain that normal tidal flow would be possible through the barriers, which would remain open at all times, except when a storm threatened the area.

But, LeMieux added, "When you weigh the remote possibility of ecological damage against the probability of loss of human life in a critical storm, I just don't see where you have a choice."

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