Lawmakers try new tack to get hurricane protection

By LAURA McKNIGHT
The Courier

HOUMA -- A bill introduced this week by Louisiana’s delegation in the U.S. House would grant long-awaited federal authorization to Terrebonne Parish’s planned hurricane-protection project, among a handful of coastal projects in Louisiana and Mississippi.

The Meeting Authorizations Required for the Coast, or MARC, Act of 2006 includes authorization for a "bare-bones" set of critical Army Corps of Engineers hurricane-protection and coastal-restoration projects, according to a news release from the office of U.S. Rep Charlie Melancon, D-Napoleionville. The bill is sponsored by all seven Louisiana House members.

Terrebonne Parish residents have waited years for the federal government to authorize the Morganza-to-the-Gulf project, a 72-mile system of levees, locks, floodgates and dams designed to protect roughly 200,000 Terrebonne and Lafourche residents from up to a Category 3 storm.

"Every attempt just puts us one step closer," said Jerome Zeringue, executive director of the Terrebonne Levee and Conservation District.

Authorization for Morganza and the other projects in the bill is also included in the Water Resources Development Act, or WRDA, the nation’s bill for major water projects. Though the bill is usually revamped every two years, the last WRDA passed in 2000, leaving the Morganza system and other projects waiting on federal authorization.

The Louisiana legislators created the MARC Act to grant the projects authorization in case WRDA again fails to materialize.

"If we get a WRDA bill, so much the better," said Melancon spokesman Ellery Gould. But, he added, "we can’t keep waiting on the perfect bill to come along."

The state and Levee District can start constructing local portions of the Morganza system without federal authorization; local leaders broke ground in March on the first Morganza levee. However, without federal authorization, the corps can spend money only on engineering and design of the project, not construction. Plans call for state and local governments to pay for 35 percent of the project and the federal government to pay for 65 percent.

"We’re only a week away from hurricane season, and we still lack the green light from Congress to protect ourselves," Melancon said. "This isn’t a matter of Louisiana’s wants. It’s a matter of what we need to protect our homes and families," Melancon added in the release.
Staff for Melancon said the congressman is still hopeful that WRDA will pass this year but thinks the new bill has a better chance because of its narrower focus.

Besides Morganza, the bill includes authorization for the following:

- Changes in the way the corps handles dredge material to better make use of sediment for coastal restoration.
- Authority for the corps to waive the non-federal share for a project in a disadvantaged community or in a coastal community impacted by a 2005 hurricane
- Studies for building hurricane protection in southwest Louisiana and Mississippi
- Raising the federal participation limit on small flood-protection projects

The MARC Act doesn’t include the massive amount of projects included in the full WRDA, which makes the legislation less likely to become ensnared in political disputes, Gould said. Though WRDA has passed the House three times since 2000, it has stalled in the U.S. Senate, bogged down by political entanglements, according to Melancon’s office.

"This is a way to get rid of some of the extraneous issues and try to pare it down to where it’s palatable to everybody," Gould said.

Melancon and others hope the timing of the measure’s introduction, just more than a week before the June 1 start of hurricane season, could prompt action, he said.

"This bipartisan legislation will provide the authorizations needed to protect Louisiana and the Gulf Coast from the next big storm," said U.S. Rep. Bobby Jindal, R-Metairie, in the release. "The residents of Louisiana cannot wait six years for the protection that is needed now."

The 2005 hurricane season highlighted the need for comprehensive, integrated storm protection and coastal-restoration work.

"There are a lot of people looking for ways to help, and this is one," Gould said.