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N.O. levees squeezed by Congress' demand for cash

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Jun 27, 5:27 PM (ET)

By CAIN BURDEAU

NEW ORLEANS (AP) - The goal to raise levees and build large-scale flood defenses around the flood-torn city could be delayed indefinitely because of congressional demands that Louisiana chip in \$1.8 billion to the effort over three years.

Thursday night, Congress approved a \$162 billion war spending bill that included \$5.8 billion for flood protection in the New Orleans region. But the funding for Army Corps of Engineers construction projects would be triggered only if the state agrees to a \$1.8 billion match.

For Louisiana, one of the nation's poorest states, the amount is staggering. If the state is forced to pay, Gov. Bobby Jindal has warned of "irreparable harm to our ongoing recovery efforts.

Louisiana would have to come up with \$1.1 billion of its share in 2010 when the corps' heaviest work load is expected, said Garret Graves, Jindal's director for coastal affairs.

Jindal and other state officials had urged Congress to give Louisiana 30 years to pay its share, but Congress was under pressure from President Bush to keep domestic spending under control in the war bill.

Now, Louisiana officials are trying to persuade Bush to extend the payments.

In a letter to Bush, U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., said the demand "flies in the face" of the president's promise to rebuild New Orleans as a better city after Hurricane Katrina hit in August 2005 and killed more than 1,600 people. After levees broke, 85 percent of the city was flooded.

The White House did not immediately respond.

"It is disheartening. We as Americans have a short memory. We're onto the next disaster without fixing the last disaster, which will mean that history will surely repeat," said Tim Doody, president of levee districts in the New Orleans region.

Louisiana is not without resources. Since the devastating 2005 hurricane season, the state has been running budget surpluses, thanks to spending on hurricane recovery and high oil prices. The surplus now stands at about \$600 million.

"The state's got the money," said John Koerner, an investment banker and member of the Flood Protection Alliance, a group of Louisiana business leaders pushing for levee construction. "It's somewhat unfair, but I would think a delay is something we absolutely cannot tolerate."

The funding squabble threatens a bevy of projects. Some might not be built if the state can't pay its share.

The corps plans to raise dozens of miles of levees, build a \$695 million storm-surge barrier in eastern New Orleans and strengthen pumping stations. The corps has said it wants to finish an improved levee system by 2011. Until now, the federal government has footed the bill to repair levees, pumps and floodwalls damaged by Katrina.

Coming up with that money would cause "extraordinary pain" and delay other critical levee and coastal restoration projects elsewhere along Louisiana's flood-prone coast, Graves said.

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