

**STATEMENT OF  
THE HONORABLE JAMES L. OBERSTAR  
RANKING DEMOCRATIC MEMBER  
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE  
MOTION TO INSTRUCT CONFEREES ON  
H.R. 2864, THE WATER RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT ACT OF 2005  
SEPTEMBER 13, 2006**

Mr. Speaker, I rise to support this motion, offered by the Gentleman from Louisiana (Mr. Melancon), to instruct the House conferees to support the maximum level of hurricane and storm damage protection for the communities of coastal Louisiana and Mississippi.

Two weeks ago, this nation honored the one year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, and the devastating impact this storm had on the Gulf Coast communities. Over the past year, we have had the ability to reflect on the lives and livelihoods that were forever changed by Hurricane Katrina, as well as on efforts to restore some sense of normalcy to the families and communities impacted by the storm. Few national efforts have been more important than those to rebuild the City of New Orleans, and the surrounding communities of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.

Not surprisingly, in the days immediately following Katrina's devastation, the Federal government spoke with one voice to support the rebuilding of Gulf Coast communities.

President Bush assured the residents of New Orleans and the outlying parishes, including St. Bernard and Plaquemine parishes, that “people are paying attention to them,” and it was the Federal government’s duty to “help the good folks of this part of the world to get back on their feet.”

A few days later, the President stood in Jackson Square, New Orleans, and made a commitment to rebuild Gulf Coast communities “better and stronger than before the storm.”

Recognizing the importance of flood protection of the Gulf Coast communities, the President assured its citizens that the “Corps of Engineers will work at [the side of state and local officials] to make the flood protection system stronger than it has ever been before.”

Unfortunately, in the time that has elapsed since the President proclaimed these words from the heart of New Orleans, the administration’s commitment to the Gulf Coast communities has wavered, and his pledge to rebuild *all* of the affected communities “better and stronger than before the storm” has fallen by the wayside – promises that have fallen victim to politics, and a renewed interest in fiscal conservatism.

While the administration may waiver in its commitment to help the families affected by Hurricane Katrina, I support this motion to instruct the conferees to renew Congressional commitment to adequately protect the entire Gulf Coast region.

Mr. Speaker, I find it ironic that this administration, which has gone on the offensive criticizing any individual who would question U.S. policy in Iraq as “cutting and running” would feel comfortable walking away from the plight of its own citizenry in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

On Monday night, marking the fifth anniversary of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, President Bush, speaking of Iraq, proclaimed to the American people that “We would not leave until the work is done.” However, it would appear that the message to the residents many Gulf coast communities is that the U.S. government will leave before the work has even commenced – and you may be on your own in rebuilding your lives.

That is unconscionable.

Mr. Speaker, one of the lessons learned from experiences of Hurricane Katrina is the importance of well designed, and properly maintained flood control structures in protecting lives and livelihoods in the coastal areas of Louisiana and Mississippi. These structures literally define the areas considered safe for homes and businesses to locate, and without which, communities, such as the City of New Orleans, could not exist.

While Hurricane Katrina did not destroy all of the more than 350 miles of flood control structures protecting southeast Louisiana, it did expose the weaknesses in a system vital to the more than one million residents of the region. Katrina was also a stark reminder of the importance of proper planning, construction, and maintenance of flood protection projects, because these projects literally protect the lives of families living behind these structures.

Mr. Speaker, this motion to instruct the conferees on H.R. 2864, the Water Resources Development Act of 2005, is important for two reasons.

First, it renews the commitment of Congress to provide the maximum level of flood protection for areas impacted by Hurricane Katrina to help its citizens restore their lives and livelihoods. Without adequate flood protection,

many citizens of the Gulf Coast simply cannot start the process of trying to rebuild their lives, because, without protection against flood and storm surge, they may be unable to obtain affordable flood insurance, mortgages, or other financial arrangements necessary to begin the process of rebuilding.

This fact is especially true for the residents of St. Bernard Parish, which I inspected on foot this past April, and Lower Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana – the communities that bore the initial force of Hurricane Katrina. In Plaquemines parish, close to one-half of all residents experienced some flooding or structural damage to their homes, and in St. Bernard parish and the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward, this number is close to 100 percent of homes.

It is inconceivable that this administration would walk away from communities that experienced such a traumatic devastation, especially after reassuring citizens that the government would help rebuild their communities “better and stronger than before the storm.” We, in Congress, need to stand with one voice in support of rebuilding all of the communities affected by this storm.

The second reason for supporting this motion is that it draws attention to the fact that hurricanes are more than just high wind events, but also carry

the threat of massive storm surges. It is these “walls of water” that caused the greatest extent of the damage from Hurricane Katrina.

Those most affected by the hurricane are well aware of the impact of storm surges, and the headaches that have ensued in the aftermath trying to rebuild these communities. I have heard numerous stories of the difficulty in convincing insurance companies that hurricane damage can take the form both of wind damage *and* flooding damage. Any Member of Congress that has visited this region has heard that insurance companies are balking at settling claims for water damage, arguing that these damages are not covered by storm policies, because they are not wind damage.

However, a storm surge is the direct result of wind-driven water. As Hurricane Katrina moved into the Gulf of Mexico, it pushed water in front of the storm, and caused the sea to rise by as much as 25 feet in areas of coastal Mississippi. But for the hurricane, there would have been no storm surge.

As we move forward with efforts to protect communities along the Gulf Coast, we must be mindful of the impact both from a hurricane’s winds, but also of the impact that such massive storms can cause from wind-driven waters. In authorizing new or restored flood protection projects to protect the

communities of the Gulf region, the Corps must ensure that projects are designed and constructed to protect against both the dangers of hurricane force winds, but also the threat of massive storm-driven waters resulting from these storms.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to support this motion to instruct, and to renew the Congressional commitment to restore the lives and livelihoods of *all* residents impacted by Hurricane Katrina.