Principles for a Levee Safety Program

Role of levees: Levees are abundant and integral to economic development and flood risk reduction in numerous communities around the United States. The National Committee on Levee Safety estimates that tens of millions of people live and work in leveed areas. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ levee systems provide a 6:1 return ratio on flood damages prevented compared to initial costs, and more robust systems such as the Mississippi River and Tributaries system provide a 44:1 return on investment. By some estimates, nearly 50 percent of Americans live in counties with levees or related flood protection infrastructure.

Levees serve an important role in our nation’s energy framework by protecting many power plant facilities, as well as the oil, gas and petrochemical industries along the Texas and Louisiana Gulf coast and the agri-business economy throughout California’s Central Valley, the Mississippi Delta Region and the Midwest. Levees, floodwalls and appurtenant infrastructure protect fire and police departments, hospitals, and schools. They are critical to the viability of our overall public infrastructure network, protecting other infrastructure, including roads, bridges, railroads, port facilities and wastewater treatment plants.

Risks and Challenges: Levee infrastructure throughout the nation is in need of attention. Much of the nation’s most productive and treasured territory exists in levee-protected areas along rivers and coastlines. Effective and improved management of levees is necessary for the continued enjoyment of the economic, societal and cultural benefits yielded by this public works investment.

- There are over 2,000 Federal (USACE) levee systems totaling more than 14,000 miles of infrastructure;
- The national inventory of Federal and non-Federal levees is estimated to total 100,000 or more miles;
- While the majority of USACE program levees are now inventoried in the National Levee Database, the number, location, and condition of most non-Federal levees is currently unknown.
WRDA Principles

As the Congress develops a Levee Safety Program for inclusion in a Water Resources Development Act, the Congress should ---

(1) Support improved clarification of Federal and non-Federal roles, such that:
(a) USACE project involvement is driven by economic return (NED benefits);
and (b) State and local actors maintain plenary responsibility for life safety and/or landside risk reduction measures such as evacuation, land use practices, building codes, and risk communication;

(2) Support establishment of well-conceived, functioning state or delegated regional (non-Federal) levee safety programs as a pre-condition for Federal participation in newly authorized and/or appropriated levee rehabilitation and improvement;

(3) Support cost-shared funding for prioritized levee rehabilitation and improvement projects, including remedial design and construction modifications at federally built projects;

(4) Oppose new top-down national levee safety standards and related unfunded Federal regulatory mandates;

(5) Oppose establishment of a summary Hazard Potential Classification System and the National Levee Safety Advisory Board;

(6) Support authorization for a one-time USACE Inventory and Inspection of non-Federal levees;

(7) Support efforts to address USACE Vegetation Management Policy that compel the agency to account for peer-reviewed scientific findings, project-specific variables, and multi-purpose demands in its VFZ variance procedures;

(8) Support a directive and adequate funding to compel USACE to reverse its 2008 policy that ended Federal certification at Fed-built levees.

The National Waterways Conference, established in 1960, is dedicated to a greater understanding of the widespread public benefits of our nation’s water resources infrastructure. Our mission is to effect common sense policies and programs, recognizing the public value of our nation’s water resources and their contribution to public safety, a competitive economy, national security, environmental quality and energy conservation. Conference membership is comprised of the full spectrum of water resources stakeholders, including flood control associations, levee boards, waterways shippers and carriers, industry and regional associations, port authorities, shipyards, dredging contractors, regional water supply districts, engineering consultants, and state and local governments.