



Gulf Coast, Mississippi River cities eager for flood funding

Cities on the Louisiana coast and Mississippi River are hoping the infrastructure law will bring badly needed funding to fortify levees, locks and other flood protection as climate change makes hurricanes stronger and wetter

By MICHAEL PHILLIS - Associated Press

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Ted Falgout points out the storm's waterline standing on the houseboat on his property that he rode out Hurricane Ida and has been living in while his home undergoes extensive repairs, in Larose, La., Thursday, April 14, 2022. As climate change increases the threat of hurricanes, cities on the Louisiana coast and Mississippi River are hoping President Biden's \$1.2 trillion infrastructure package will provide badly needed funding to fortify locks, levees and other flood protections.

Gerald Herbert - staff, AP

ST. LOUIS (AP) — When Hurricane Ida hit last summer, a storm surge overwhelmed a levee and gushed into Ted Falgout's coastal Louisiana home, destroying his furniture and the beloved framed photos of his twin sons kissing him on their first day of school, then again when they graduated high school.

"That water was probably 60% mud," said Falgout, who's hoping relief is on the way for his community in Larose, about 30 miles southwest of New Orleans.

As climate change makes hurricanes stronger and wetter and increases storm surges, cities on the Louisiana coast and Mississippi River are hoping President Biden's \$1.2 trillion infrastructure package will provide badly needed funding to fortify locks, levees and other flood protections. But community groups and advocates fear smaller cities will struggle to navigate the maze of government programs and miss out on the rare chance to protect against rising waters and heavy rains.



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"I think the agencies are still figuring a lot of this out," said Colin Wellenkamp, executive director of the Mississippi River Cities and Towns Initiative, which advocates for communities along the river.

While many swaths of the country are at risk for flooding, the Louisiana coast has long been especially vulnerable and the Upper Mississippi is part of a region where flood severity is increasing faster than in any other area of the country.

La Crosse, Wisconsin is among the cities trying to figure out how to benefit as infrastructure funds start rolling out.

The city's levees were built after devastating flooding in 1965 and don't meet federal standards that would help lower insurance rates and make it easier for residents to fix up their homes without having to spend more to protect against floods, said Brad Woznak of SEH, a flood planning consultant for the city.

Upgrading the levees would be so expensive it's hard for the city to know how to get started, he said.

"But with this potential infrastructure bill funding, that's what I keep telling them — don't rule anything out yet," Woznak said, noting that it could be a chance to pay for an initial evaluation for the project.

Some advocates want agencies to make it easier for communities to learn about funding opportunities and ensure that simple applications from small towns will be able to compete against more sophisticated proposals from richer cities. They also want more clarity into how the Biden administration considers factors like economic and environmental inequality in its funding decisions.

The Biden administration is asking states to make climate resilience a part of their long-term planning and encouraging projects that factor in flood risk. It tapped Mitch Landrieu, the former mayor of New Orleans, to help coordinate the law's implementation and outreach to communities

"There needs to be a concerted effort by the administration and federal government to engage states and localities now," said Forbes Tompkins, a flood policy expert at Pew Charitable Trusts.



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The Environmental Protection Agency also said it will offer assistance to disadvantaged areas and states have money to help small communities access funding for drinking and wastewater projects. Rural communities are also getting special guidance on tapping into the money.

But further complicating the scramble for funding is debate about the best approaches for protecting against floods. In addition to protections like levees and floodgates, Congress directed the Army Corps to more seriously consider natural solutions like the restoration of wetlands.

Wetlands help absorb water before it can reach communities while restoring wildlife habitat, recharging groundwater and providing more green space, noted Olivia Dorothy of the conservation group American Rivers.

After flooding in 2019 breached a levee in northwest Missouri on the Missouri River, for example, the levee was moved back to create more than 1,000 acres of floodplain and added wetlands.

Dorothy said more natural protections are especially needed along the Mississippi.

In Louisiana, Larose is among the small communities that were lucky enough to benefit from early funding from the infrastructure law because of a long-running project in the broader area.

In January, the Army Corps allocated \$379 million to continue work on a series of locks, levees and other structures that will help protect 150,000 residents in coastal Louisiana. Once completed, local officials said the Morganza-to-the-Gulf project will likely shield Falgout's home from another storm like Ida.

For now, Falgout and his wife are living in their boathouse while their home is repaired. The property had escaped flooding in the past but Falgout said the shrinking Louisiana coast is making it more vulnerable.

"It would be a shame to walk away," he said.

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