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Mississippi may shift

Change in river feared

BATON ROUGE, La. — Engineers Wednesday warned that the Mississippi River is dangerously near abandoning its main channel within 1 to 20 years.

Louisiana officials were told that the river might soon break out of its current channel and overtake the small Atchafalaya River for a shorter route to the Gulf of Mexico. This would necessitate a billion-dollar emergency repair job calling for man-made locks, dams and almost constant dredging to keep the waterway open for ocean-going ships.

In a report of their two-year study, engineers said the breakout would occur in the center of the state where Louisiana and Mississippi are separated by the river. It could come as early as next spring or could be delayed up to 20 years by a planned \$216 million channel control project by the Army Corps of Engineers.

Dr. Raphael Kazmann said the break would occur at the Old River Control Structure — an 18-year-old system of dams, levees and locks near Simmsport, La., that keeps the channel heading southeast to New Orleans. Kazmann said the auxiliary structure "may buy us 20 years, but we've got to hurry up and get it built."

Economist David Johnson said if the change occurs soon, the increased water flow in the Atchafalaya channel could destroy eight bridges and rip apart natural gas pipelines supplying fuel to 28 eastern and southern states.

Costs of emergency repairs if the break occurs suddenly were estimated in the billions of dollars.

"We are talking about a calamity too horrible to contemplate," said state Rep. Jesse Guidry, whose Cecilia, La., home lies in the future flood plain. Guidry said the federal government would have to foot the bill.

Kazmann said the Mississippi could make its inevitable move as soon as next spring if the state experiences

floods similar to those in 1973. The added water would increase currents enough to knock out existing levees and send millions of cubic feet of water surging down the Atchafalaya River, knocking out bridges, destroying land wildlife, rupturing oil and gas pipelines and causing massive flooding in Morgan City.

In the event of a flood, residents would have more days to evacuate flood-prone areas, but said the force of Mississippi River water rushing down the Atchafalaya will scour out the bottom, undermine bridge pilings and dump the lower Atchafalaya Basin.

The Mississippi channel between Baton Rouge and New Orleans would be reduced to a bracketed channel, he said. With locks or nearly constant dredging, the river could remain navigable, but New Orleans would need a new municipal water supply.

Scientists have known for nearly a century that the lower Mississippi channel was shifting. Guidry said the main channel was once what now is Lake de Cade — a waterway about halfway between present day Mississippi River and the Atchafalaya study completed in 1890 first identified the struggle to take over the Atchafalaya.

Following massive floods in 1927, the federal government authorized construction of a huge system of gates and river controls near Simmsport, La., to divert water to siphon off Mississippi River water and save New Orleans and other towns from flooding.

Kazmann said continuous land development and dam projects on rivers that flow into the Mississippi have increased the underwater currents of the channel that have been eating away at the structures.

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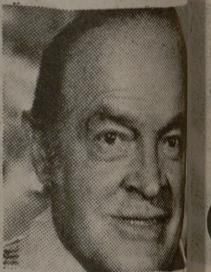
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