Corps to open portion of Bonnet Carre Spillway

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The Corps of Engineers will begin opening a portion of the Bonnet Carre Spillway on Friday.

The opening of Lake Pontchartrain into the Mississippi River will mark the sixth time Bonnet Carre has been used.

The spillway, located just south of LaPlace and approximately 30 miles north of New Orleans, diverts water from the Mississippi River into Lake Pontchartrain to the Gulf of Mexico.

"The purpose of the opening is to keep the river flowing to the New Orleans area from exceeding 1,250,000 cubic feet per second, which is what we consider to be the safe capacity of the levees from the spillway south to the Gulf of Mexico," said Bruce Sossaman, corps public affairs officer.

The U.S. Weather Service originally projected a crest of approximately 18 feet at New Orleans later this month.

"That's what it would have been, but we'll knock that crest off at the point when we open the spillway," Sossaman said Wednesday. "Right now, the level is at 16.6 feet. We're going to hold it at 17."

Corps officials aren't sure how long the spillway will remain open.

"We don't really know," Sossaman said.

"It depends on what comes behind it. They've been getting rain pretty regularly across the Upper Mississippi Valley to the east and west, both." If the river still continues to rise, additional bays may be opened.

"We'll open 50 bays," Sossaman said. "But as the river continues to go up, we'll continue to open bays, so we can hold it at 17 feet or lower."

The spillway will result in a small rise on Lake Pontchartrain.

"With 50 bays open, you'll raise the level probably an inch or less," Sossaman said. "Probably less."

"As we continue to increase the bays, you'll raise the level slightly. That shouldn't cause any damage, though. The maximum we ever got was six inches on Lake Pontchartrain for a full opening," Sossaman said.

The opening of the 50 bays will not be a spectacular sight.

"The spillway itself will get flooded," he said. "And then you'll have a sizable amount of water pouring through there. That's about the only change you will see."

Sossaman said the corps has made all of the preparations for the opening.

"We've already done it," he said. "When the water gets to a certain elevation, we issue letters and notices to the people who have interests in the spillway area, such as the sand haulers, to remove their equipment.

"Then we test our equipment to make sure all the gantry cranes are working right and that there are no logs jamming any of the bays."

South of New Orleans, in Plaquemines Parish, the corps is constructing a board fence to protect a newly enlarged levee against erosion from wavewash.

To protect that west-bank levee, located between Belle Chasse and Myrtle Grove, the corps is picking up an existing contract to allow for the placement of 4,400 feet of the revetment.

The original contract was awarded in April 1982 to enlarge the levee and pave its slope on the river side for permanent erosion protection. Part of the work has been completed, but high water in January prevented the contractor from completing the project. As a result, the bare levee above a paved portion is susceptible to erosion by wavewash from passing vessels.

Sossaman said the board-fence revetment should be completed this week.

The Weather Service is projecting a 46.5-foot crest on the Mississippi River at the (See SPILLWAY, Page 6-A)