Flooding may close grain elevators

Advocate wire and staff reports

The Baton Rouge elevator primarily handles grain produced by area farmers and is awaiting the August corn harvest for export, said Ole Christiansen, manager for Cargill Inc. Mississippi have blocked shipments as far south as St. Louis, a company spokesman said.

Meanwhile, in Baton Rouge, a publicly owned grain elevator at the local port is not being affected by the river closure, officials said.

See GRAIN, Page 2D
Christiansen said incoming ships have been loaded with no problems. He would not speculate on when or if the upriver closure of the Mississippi will cause any problems at the Reserve terminal.

While the river flooding may not be having an immediate impact in Baton Rouge, resulting crop damage could reduce future rail shipments of grain from the Midwest to the Port of Greater Baton Rouge for export, said Port Director Gary Pruitt. Those shipments typically go to commercially run elevators, but make up a fraction of the local grain elevator's cargo, he said.

Much of the nation's exports go through southern Louisiana, said Don Bass of Metairie, whose Blue Water Shipping Co. specializes in handling grain. “Come July 15, there is going to be a severe reduction of grain,” he said Tuesday. There could be some layoffs, and 40 to 60 big grain ships would be idled on the river waiting for grain, he added.

The grain they are waiting for will not reach elevators in the New Orleans area until Aug. 1 at the earliest, said Morris Larson, executive vice president of the Merchants Exchange in St. Louis, a clearinghouse for barge freight. “One tries to be optimistic, but we don't really know when it's going to stop raining,” Larson said.

Now, even more upriver terminals are blocked, with the barges unable to enter the Illinois River's mouth just above St. Louis. Larson said the continued slow downs on the river could cause river traffic jams once the Mississippi is reopened.

However, the continuing rain in the Midwest poses no flooding threat here, the National Weather Service said.

It could push the crest in New Orleans to 11 feet, and flood stage is 17 feet, said George Cry of the weather service's River Forecast Center.

"Throughout most of the spring we were above 11 feet consistently," he said. "It was no problem. There will be no danger, damage or concern here."