No danger for the Twin Cities’ demise

A Staff Report.

Thanks to the recent Public Broadcasting Service Special, Goodbye Louisiana, the number of stories concerning the ultimate demise of Morgan City and Berwick have abounded. The scenario is that the old river control structure near Simmesport will crumble and the Mississippi River will pour a solid wall of water down the Atchafalaya River, turning Morgan City into Louisiana Versions of Venice, Italy. Others claim the cities would become the next great towns of the Caribbean.

“There’s no way we’ll ever let the Atchafalaya River capture the Mississippi River and wipe out Morgan City.” That was the counterattack by New Orleans District Commander Robert C. Lee, Army Corps of Engineers. Col. Lee says the old river structure, “first, is only about 600 feet wide. So before any wall of water would descend on the city, we first have to find out how much water is in the Mississippi and at what flow.” The entire old river control structure is about 4 miles long, with the control structure itself only 600 feet long. The structure was damaged during the ’73 flood but Lee assures that the control structure is back to 100%.

When questioned about the effect the old river structure had on Morgan City, Lee says, “in ’73, had old river mysteriously vanished, there would have been little notice of it at Morgan City.” The commander continued that the Atchafalaya River was carrying about 960 thousand cubic gallons of water a minute past the city and had the Atchafalaya, through a crumbled structure, captured the Mississippi, there would have been no increase, save for about 35 thousand gallons a minute past Morgan City.”

The corps is currently beginning work on the old river auxiliary control structure, a sort of back up to the current structure. Lee says that even if Old River would “be vaporized by Martians, the auxiliary structure would hold.”

Critics continue to claim that the Mississippi River will eventually flow down the Atchafalaya River, letting Gulf water up in the current channel as far north as Baton Rouge. One gets the impression that the Corps of Engineers would throw their bodies into any breach at Old River before letting that happen. Col. Lee says the Corps does have the capabilities to at least slow any breach of Old River enough to make repairs. “Even if the structure would have failed in ’73, there’s scientific evidence that instead of the current 30-70% flow we have now (70% of the Mississippi stays in the river, 30% is allowed into the basin) the flow would have changed only to 40-60%.”

So according to Col. Lee, the chances of Morgan City residents vacationing year round in the sunny tropics are few indeed.

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p. 1 COL. 5-6