Spillway may have to be opened

By TIM TALLEY
Advocate state writer.

With a Mississippi River crest of almost 18 feet predicted at New Orleans, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is thinking about opening the Bonnet Carre Spillway in St. Charles Parish, a state official said Thursday.

"It looks very likely now that the spillway will have to be opened," said Gasper A. Chificki, a district public works engineer for the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development.

The spillway diverts water from the river to Lake Pontchartrain to relieve pressure from flood-control structures in the New Orleans area. When the spillway's 350 floodgates are fully open, more than 250,000 cubic feet of water passes through every second.

As Mississippi River watchers raise their forecasts for crests this month, federal inspectors are planning a week-long, 1,000-mile trip down the river to examine how flood-control facilities respond under the pressures of high water.

Members of the Mississippi River Commission, a federal agency based in Vicksburg, Miss., will launch their annual high-water inspection of the river and its anti-flood structures on Monday, according to commission spokesman Roger Steakley.

The commission, manager of flood-prevention and navigation facilities in the river's lower alluvial valley, will spend five days inspecting more than 2,200 miles of levees, floodwalls and spillways from Cape Girardeau, Mo. to the Gulf of Mexico, said Steakley.

Commission members have scheduled four public hearings at principal cities on the river to discuss flood-control and navigation problems. The public hearings will be at Cairo, Ill.; Memphis, Tenn.; Vicksburg; and New Orleans.

The National Weather Service's Lower Mississippi River Forecast Center at Slidell has revised upward its prediction for crests on the river in late May, a weather service spokesman said Thursday.

The river is now expected to crest at Baton Rouge on May 28 at a level of 41.3

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River

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feet, the spokesman said. The crest at
the Carrollton river gauge in New
Orleans will be 17.8 feet on May 29, he
said.

River stages Thursday were 36.2 feet
at Baton Rouge and 15 feet at the
Carrollton gauge. Without man-made
levees and other flood-control
structures, the river would spill from its
natural bank at levels of 35 feet in Baton
Rouge and 17 feet in New Orleans.

The corps will mobilize itself and
order local, state and federal levee
maintenance agencies to begin Phase 1
of the corps' flood fight procedure on
Monday, coinciding with the start of the
Mississippi River Commission's
inspection tour, Chifici said.

Bruce Sossaman, a spokesman for the
corps, said earlier this week that corps
officials will be dispatched to various
locations along the river when the flood
fight order is given.

The local corps commanders will
coordinate daily surveillance by the
corps and other agencies of levees and
other flood-control facilities, and
provide technical assistance if
problems arise, according to Sossaman.

"We don't see any problems at this
point," he said. He said visitors to the
Louisiana World Exposition, which
opens on Saturday along the river in
New Orleans, will be in no danger and
will not be aware of the high-water
alert.

Steakley said the commission's tour is
scheduled to end Friday. The last of the
commission's public hearings is set for 9
a.m. Friday at the corps' offices at the
foot of Prytania Street in New Orleans,
his said.

All of the hearings will be held aboard
the MV Mississippi, a diesel-powered	
towboat operated by the commission
and based in Memphis, Steakley said.

Maj. Gen. William E. Read,
commission chairman, will present a
report on the condition of the river's
lower valley, and commissioners will
discuss river conditions with the public,
the commission spokesman said.

The high-water inspection will be the
commission's first in two years. The
inspection was canceled last year
because unusually high river levels
forced commission members to turn
their attention toward problems the
river was creating.

The Mississippi recorded its third-
greatest level of the century in 1983,
flowing at a peak rate of 2.15 million
cubic feet of water per second,
according to corps officials.

The commission schedules two river
inspections annually, during normal
high- and low-water periods, said
Steakley.