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Post Katrina: Improvements Made to New Orleans Storm Protection Systems

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Eyes on the Rise

Post-Katrina: Improvements Made to New Orleans Storm Protection Systems

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NOLA's pumps, like these at 17th Street, are similar to Miami's canal system in that the pumps move water away from the city.

FIU's Dr. Juliet Pinto Leads Tour of Water Systems in Post-Katrina New Orleans

By Juliet Pinto

Becoming resilient in the face of rising seas can take many forms, something those who cover impacts of changing climates understand well.

Dr. Juliet Pinto, who is an eyesontherise.org team member, participated in the 24th annual conference of the Society of Environmental Journalists in New Orleans, La., Sept. 3-7, 2014, "Risk and Resiliency."

Dr. Juliet Pinto

Together with Jeff Adelson from the New Orleans Advocate, she co-led the "Risky Business" tour for journalists, academics and others, which focused on the $14.5 billion hurricane storm surge risk reduction system constructed by the Army Corps of Engineers that includes new pumps, levees and surge barriers.

Tour speakers from the Corps, the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-West as well as citizens and activists who lived through the storm highlighted the stark differences between the systems pre- and post-Katrina. The group viewed portions of the post-Katrina Hurricane and Storm Damage Risk Reduction System, designed by the Corps to keep at bay the storm surge that would otherwise come into New Orleans' canal systems and waterways and flood the city and surrounding areas.

"We're taking the fight to the storm, instead of letting the storm come to us," Corps public affairs specialist, Rene Poche said.

The SEJ group toured several of the Corps' recently completed projects,

including the billion-dollar Gulf Intracoastal Waterway-West Closure Complex, encompassing the world's largest internal drainage system, with nine pumps that can drain an Olympic size-pool in less than four seconds, as well as the country's largest sector gates to provide protection against storm surge.

Surveying Canal Infrastructure

Stop number two was the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal Surge Barrier, a 1.8-mile long, 26-foot high concrete wall, gate and pump system that cuts off the Mississippi River and Gulf Coast. Such protection would have helped during Katrina, when the surge was 16-22 feet above sea level and ran from this point straight up the Mississippi into the Lower Ninth Ward.

The group then toured the 17th Street Canal infrastructure located around one of three important outfall canals that carry rainwater and runoff into Lake Pontchartrain, a storage basin of water for the region.

"The 17th Street Canal is the largest and most important drainage canal in New Orleans," said Sandy Rosental, founder of levees.org.

The London Canal Levee, shown here, is where water broke through to flood much of New Orleans in 2005.

During Katrina, 17-foot storm surge from the Lake flowed back into the canals and flooded the community. The Corps constructed more gates and

pumps to prevent backflow from the lake.

However, even this multi-billion-dollar investment post-Katrina does not guarantee protection against another tragic event, something the speakers emphasized.

"The purpose of the system is risk reduction. It is not going to defend against everything," Corps spokesman Ricky Boyett said. "There is always the potential for a storm larger than the system we created."

New, massive NOLA pumps

Concluding the tour, the group visited the site of the infamous London Canal breach in the Filmore Gardens neighborhood, where according to Rosental, improperly designed levees broke during the storm and the city was flooded. "When these canal walls were built, we were doomed," Rosental said. "It was a tragic mistake."

Bringing Awareness to Sea Level Rise

After the tour, Pinto presented SJMC initiatives on sea level rise in South Florida as part of a panel to the importance of interdisciplinary and professional collaborations for academics working in environmental journalism.

Other members of the panel were Sharon Friedman, professor and director of the Science and Environmental Writing Program at Lehigh University; and Michael Kodas, a photojournalist and associate director of the Center for Environmental Journalism at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

The panel was moderated by Eric Freedman, professor and director of

the Knight Center for Environmental Reporting at Michigan State University.

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