May 6, 2020

Via electronic mail

Neil T. Gauthier  
Project Manager  
United States Army Corps of Engineers  
New Orleans District  
Regulatory Branch  
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Dear Mr. Gauthier:

The undersigned groups respectfully request that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (“Corps”) extend the public comment period on the above referenced application for sixty (60) days. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe a 60-day extension of the deadline for comments is necessary for the public to review project information and provide input for this permit application. We also write to request a public hearing be held to consider this application when it is safe to convene members of the public after the risk of COVID-19 transmission subsides.

Recommendations and orders from the Centers for Disease Control, local public health departments, Governor Edwards, and other epidemiological experts prohibit public gatherings of any substantial size and recommend that elderly and other vulnerable populations self-isolate. For the communities in St. Charles, St. John the Baptist, and St. James Parishes that would be
directly impacted by this project, there are limitations to health care resources that are being exacerbated by the current pandemic. Thus, the impacted communities are already overextended and must focus on the public health crisis, which has already killed more than 2,000 Louisiana residents, 58% of them African-Americans. For example, St. John the Baptist has the highest COVID-19 death rate per capita in the country. It is extremely challenging, if not impossible, for individuals to provide public comment or to devote resources toward engaging in this process when there are more pressing health and family concerns. Additionally, there are complexities of the project because of its location and impacts on wetlands that will require considerably more time than allowed. Proceeding without an extension of the public comment period during this crisis would violate the Corps’ obligation to meaningfully involve the public in its decision-making process.

Given these difficult circumstances, we request that any public hearing be scheduled only after health officials confirm that the risk of transmission has subsided and shelter-in-place orders have been lifted. This is especially critical for individuals who are affected by the proposed project and are vulnerable to serious illness from COVID-19 in the three River parishes. Many residents in these parishes remain without reliable internet access or the ability to effectively participate in virtual hearings. To allow for meaningful public input on the application and the Corps’ public interest review, a public hearing must be held in-person.

In summary, we urge the Corps to extend the May 17, 2020 deadline for 60 days to allow meaningful public input and for a public hearing to be held to consider the permit application #MVN 2019-00376-CM.

Sincerely,

Renate Heurich
Board Vice President
350 New Orleans

Miyoko Sakashita
Oceans Director
Center for Biological Diversity

Sylvia McKenzie
Executive Committee
Coalition Against Death Alley

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Mary Gutierrez  
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