January 4, 2010

Senator David Vitter
516 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Streamgage Support for USGS Program
Interior Department Appropriations for FY2011

Dear Senator Vitter,

Katrina, Rita, Gustav. It happens again and again. Not only in southern Louisiana, but throughout the state, flooding is a reoccurring event affecting thousands of our citizens.

An important tool in fighting these conditions is a strong data base of what has occurred in the past. The cornerstone of this data base is a system of stream gauges with long-term records. The principal collector of this data is the U. S. Geological Survey’s National Streamflow Information Program (NSIP) and its Cooperative Water Program (CWP).

Unfortunately, over the years, these programs have eroded due to steady reductions in funding. This has caused many long term gauges to be closed. In recent years, dozens of gauging stations in Louisiana have been terminated and over half of these had continuous records of over 40 years. Additional streamgages throughout the state are threatened with closure including many in the New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Lafayette, Alexandria, Shreveport and Monroe areas.

Long term streamgage stations are vital. In coastal areas, it is very difficult to determine water surface elevations due to tidal and wind effects. Measurements from streamgages provide actual data on which water surface elevations can be based. In riverine areas, long term streamgage records are used to calibrate computer models or to make direct determinations of water surface elevations. The key is that they must be long term to be relevant. USGS has been phasing out many of these gages. The data during these phase out periods will be lost forever and the gage viability will be compromised. It is important that the gages be continued for our present use and expanded for future generations.

Concern for the long-term continuity and reliability of our national streamgaging data led the Congress to ask USGS for a solution and USGS proposed the NSIP in 1999. NSIP was intended to operate as a federally-funded “backbone,” supporting a national streamgaging framework of approximately 4,770 streamgages and tidal gages necessary to fulfill five specific national purposes. However, of the 4,770 streamgages that are necessary to sustain those five national purposes, more than 425 have not been installed yet, more than 970 need to be reactivated and more than 2,700 active NSIP gages are funded (wholly or partially) with CWP.
funds. Furthermore, most of those streamgages still need to be “flood hardened” and updated for real-time communications in order to provide reliable and timely flood forecast information. Reliable sources of data and science have never been more important in protecting American communities, businesses, infrastructure investments while we recover from the severe flooding and droughts that have caused so much damage and adapt to the consequences of climate change.

The Louisiana Floodplain Management Association urges your support to enable the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) to fully implement its design for the National Streamflow Information Program beginning in FY-2011 and to restore the capacity for USGS to match non-federal cost-share investments in the Cooperative Water Program on a 50:50 basis. Full implementation of the NSIP will require an annual appropriation of $110 million ($27.7 million was enacted for FY-2010). With a fully functioning NSIP, the USGS will also need approximately $95 million for the CWP to restore its capacity to fully match state, tribal and other non-federal investments in data collection and interpretive investigations (the FY-2010 budget included only $65.5 million).

These measures would represent a very reasonable investment, considering the magnitude of our ongoing disaster emergency expenses and the federal responsibilities and programs that depend on information from the NSIP streamgages.

Yours Very Truly,

Theodore E. DeBaene, P.E., CFM
Executive Director

TED/bls

cc: Board of Directors