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Video and audio recording of the briefing will be available after 12 pm Central Time

Mississippi River Cities Prepare for Major Hurricane During COVID-19 Pandemic, Address Overlapping Risks

June 1, 2020, New Orleans, LA – Mayors of the Mississippi River Cities & Towns Initiative (MRCTI) opened the 2020 hurricane season by working collectively at corridor scale to accumulate capacity, equipment, plans, and procedures to address evacuations, shelters, and disaster response while at the same time limiting contagion in the era of COVID.

Risk is High for an Active Atlantic Hurricane Season with a Mississippi River at Flood Stage
Forecasters at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) predict a 60% chance of an above-normal hurricane activity in the Atlantic with a likely range of 13 to 19 named storms of which 3 to 6 could be major hurricanes (category 3, 4 or 5; with winds of 111 mph or higher) during this season.

"The USGS stands prepared to provide the comprehensive scientific capabilities and information that decision makers, emergency responders, and communities can use to help them prepare, cope with and recover from a storm," said Holly Weyers, USGS regional director.

Mayors are Front-Line Commanders in a 3-Front Fight
Mayors are currently facing a fight on three fronts. On one front, we have the pandemic, on another the 2020 flood and hurricane seasons, and thirdly the depletion of local government revenues.
“Many of our cities have not been reimbursed for the expense they incurred last year saving their cities from historic flooding that lasted 9 months in some areas; couple that with the financial strain presented by the pandemic and you get a local government fiscal crisis that inhibits our ability to fund capacity to deal with overlapping events such as flooding and storms,” explained Bob Gallagher, Mayor of Bettendorf, IA and MRCTI Co-Chair.

Both the Flood of 2019 and the Pandemic are Changing Disaster Response
Cities along the Mississippi River have been using lessons learned and valuable new tools developed out the historic flood of 2019 to better prepare for 2020. Additionally, the pandemic is motivating new partnerships and disaster management designs intended to limit contagion for both responders and evacuees.

“Here in Baton Rouge, we are preparing for the high probability of a major hurricane by using the valuable lessons learned from the other storm events. In fact, during Hurricane Barry last year, valuable inundation mapping provided to us by USGS through a newly developed Mississippi River disaster prediction portal enabled us to make plans if the storm stalled and caused catastrophic impacts. Also, we are using the procedures that were put into practice during the H1N1 outbreak of 2009 which overlapped with that year’s hurricane season to help us in 2020,” stated Sharon Weston Broom, Mayor of Baton Rouge, LA and MRCTI Co-Chair.

“For New Orleans, the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the high levels of the Mississippi River, presents a significant complexity to the 2020 hurricane season,” said LaToya Cantrell, Mayor of New Orleans. “We are working to meet this threat by implementing new plans that include additional supplies of PPE for both personnel and evacuees, including all major city agencies and departments in preparations moving up the timelines of activating flood control systems, and urging residents to prepare and take the threat of a major storm seriously.”

Mississippi River Mayors Have Already Managed Significant Overlapping Threats
Mayors along the Mississippi River have been using their collective demand to secure additional resources of PPE so there is capacity to manage a major event during the pandemic.

“The River has not been down since early fall 2018. So, we are definitely preparing for hurricane impacts as if that River will be high. Our convention center is equipped to be a shelter. We are now assembling the partnerships and materials we need to retrofit that facility for the pandemic. Specifically, we need partitions and screens to limit contagion and we are working with our state, the Corps, FEMA, and the Red Cross to ensure we have what is needed. We’re also accumulating additional PPE from MRCTI and other outlets,” assured Buz Craft, Mayor of Vidalia, LA.

“With the release of FEMA’s new guidance in May on sheltering and evacuations, we are now reaching-out to our area hotel companies to establish sheltering contracts in the event we need them for a large-scale event. Additional PPE is a big part of the process. I need all the PPE I can get for not just first responders, public, works, and volunteers but also my food bank workers and other essential service personnel,” iterated Kevin Smith, Mayor of Helena-West Helena, AR.
Video and Audio from this morning’s press conference will be available after 12PM Central Time today, please contact Jim Gwinner at jgwinner@LS2group.com for that file.

Mayors attending the MRCTI press call and available for media inquiries:

- Hon. Bob Gallagher – City of Bettendorf, IA & MRCTI Co-Chair
- Hon. Sharon Weston Broome – City of Baton Rouge, LA & MRCTI Co-Chair
- Hon. LaToya Cantrell – City of New Orleans, LA
- Hon. Buz Craft – City of Vidalia, LA
- Hon. Kevin Smith – City of Helena, West Helena, AR

Mississippi River Cities & Towns Initiative (MRCTI) is a coalition of 96 mayors from across the Mississippi River Corridor which spans along ten states from Minnesota to Louisiana. The Mississippi River provides drinking water to more than 20 million people and 50 cities. More than 40 percent of the nation’s agricultural commodity output moves on the Mississippi River. The River’s resources support 1.5 million jobs and create $496.7 billion in annual revenue.