

Sandbag Levee Saves Homeowner from Flooding - and Grief

ASCENSION PARISH, La. – As heavy rains from Hurricane Isaac poured down over the town of Sorrento in late August 2012, longtime resident Barry J. Waguespack sprang into action to protect his home from serious damage — with a little help from some good friends, his parish government, and a few prisoners.

Isaac made first landfall in Louisiana on August 28, moved back out over the Gulf and then struck land again on August 29. As the slow-moving storm unleashed a deluge — nearly 14 inches in all over Sorrento — Waguespack summoned a team of friends and neighbors he has dubbed “the flood fighters.” Working in three shifts, in teams of six to eight men, the flood fighters used three small tractors, one borrowed and two rented, to build a levee around the retired railroad inspector’s house.

Waguespack also reached out to his parish officials, who responded quickly to his predicament by delivering sandbags that had been filled by inmates from the Ascension Parish Sheriff’s Office Jail and the Elayn Hunt Correctional Center. What’s more, the sandbags were especially effective because they were wrapped in clear plastic sheeting as recommended by Louisiana State University’s Agricultural Center.

With good friends donating their labor and the parish helping out with sandbags, the whole project cost Waguespack just \$800, mainly for tractor rentals and other expenses. His insurance deductible is higher than that amount.

More importantly, the effort was successful. Waguespack’s levee-and-sandbag effort was high enough to stave off flooding from 18 inches of water, saving him from days and weeks of damage cleanup and misery. He did have to fix a cracked window and minor roof damage, but the small amount of water that seeped into his house was easily removed with a sump pump.

“I just hope telling my story helps somebody else,” Waguespack said, as part of explaining his effort and the efforts of others who helped him.

This wasn’t the first time Waguespack had mitigated his property. After buying the two-acre lot, which he described as a “hole,” he elevated it one foot with 80 truckloads of river silt before he started construction of his house.

Even then, 12 years ago, he knew the area could flood. His home is three miles from the Mississippi River and is located within the Special Flood Hazard Area based on the Flood Insurance Rate Map. Bayou Conway is the nearest body of water. Waguespack has had flood insurance for his home since 2001.

For other Louisianans who want to be prepared as Waguespack was, Louisiana State University’s Agricultural Center, through its Cooperative Extension Service, has published the fact sheet “Using Sandbags for Flood Protection.”



It includes such tips as:

- Sandbags alone, when filled and stacked properly, can hold back flood-water, but are most effective when used with polyethylene (plastic) sheeting. Although bags may be burlap or plastic, the plastic bags can be reused; burlap bags tend to rot after use.
- When creating a flood barrier with sandbags, stack sandbags so the seams between bags are staggered. Tuck the top of each bag under so the bag is sealed by its own weight.
- If you need protection from water deeper than two feet, the stack of sandbags should look more like a levee.
- It's important to note that a permanent or temporary floodwall or levee is not a complete protection system. Have an evacuation plan. Decide in advance when you will abandon a flood fight and save your life.

The Extension's flood mitigation work is supported by the Federal Emergency Management Agency through its Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). The HMGP is administered in Louisiana by the Louisiana Office of Emergency Preparedness.

Additional flood protection and recovery information is available from the parish of the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service or at LSU Agricultural Center's website: www.louisianafloods.org.