

Geocell Demonstrates Rapid Deployment Flood Wall in Cape Girardeau, Missouri

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REUSABLE PLASTIC FLOODWALL



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Representatives of Geocell Systems and Spartech Plastics demonstrated the Rapid Deployment Floodwall in the Main Street parking lot in downtown Cape Girardeau Tuesday.

Inventors say product makes sandbags obsolete

► The manufacturers have asked the federal government for \$12 million, which would pay for 16 miles of floodwall.

By SCOTT MOYERS
Southeast Missouriian

Weeks after Southeast Missouri sat awash with flood problems, a new product with Cape Girardeau connections is being hyped as a revolution in flood control that will eliminate the need for sandbags.

The product, known as the Rapid Deployment Floodwall, made its Missouri debut with a demonstration Tuesday in downtown Cape Girardeau. Elected officials and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers attended.

It was a fitting audience considering the manufacturers of the floodwall — including local plastics company Spartech, California-based Geocell Systems Inc., and Georgia-based Eastman Chemical Co. — are attempting to sell the government what is basically an expandable, reusable plastic floodwall they claim can be filled with sand 100 times quicker than sandbags.

"Until now, there has been no other choice but to use sandbags in flooding emergencies," said Al Arellanes, president of Geocell and the primary designer of the product. "We now have more efficient means for flood protection that could save millions of dollars, countless hours and untold heartache in the future."

The manufacturers have



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Al Arellanes, president of Geocell Systems, stood by a filled example of his company's Rapid Deployment Floodwall.

asked the federal government for \$12 million, which would pay for roughly 16 miles of floodwall that could be used up to six times, though they said they know they are actually looking to get about half of that.

But U.S. Rep. Jo Ann Emerson, who was on hand at the presentation and liked the product, said she doesn't expect the government will come up with even that much.

Requested a pilot project

She said she "would be happy" with \$2 million to pay for a pilot project to determine how well the product

would work. If approved, Emerson promised that one of the pilot projects would be in Southeast Missouri.

Emerson is on the energy and water subcommittee of the appropriations committee. She said she has put in a request for funds for a pilot project. The way it would work is that the money would be put into the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' budget and they would oversee the project, she said.

Her instincts tell her it's a good product.

"They've really proved to

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Plastic

Inventors says reusable plastic floodwall will make sandbags obsolete.

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me it's a valuable concept and one I wish I had thought of," she said. "If we had been able to deploy this in Dutchtown, think of how much faster our ability would have been to protect people."

But Alan Hunter, the area engineer for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' St. Louis District, said he wants to know more before he makes a judgment.

"I don't know enough about it yet," he said. "It looks like it would certainly be faster. It would take a lot less labor, and I think it would be a good idea in places we really need it."

Hunter said other engineers will be looking at the product at its next demonstration, Thursday in St. Louis.

The floodwall, developed

through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, is an expandable, stackable, modular wall made of tough, lightweight, environmentally responsible plastic, Arellanes said.

The demonstration included two groups of volunteers, politicians and employees for the companies involved. One group made sandbags and the other put together the floodwall. With a tug, the plastic sheets formed a boxed row of plastic cells, each able to hold roughly the same amount of sand as 37 sandbags.

Side-by-side demonstration

After several of the plastic sheets were stacked to about 4 feet high, a Bobcat front loader quickly dumped sand into the squares as the other group worked with their hands and shovels.

During the same half-hour that it took one group to make a handful of sandbags, another created a 20-foot-long plastic floodwall that is roughly the equivalent of 1,000 sandbags, Arellanes said.

"It's so much faster," he said. "It would be so cost-effective."

Arellanes said the plastic floodwall can go as high as 6 feet, but after 4 feet it becomes cumbersome.

Village clerk skeptical

Many people talked about what the plastic floodwall might have meant in Dutchtown. A few homes in Dutchtown were affected by flooding, but village clerk Robert Moss said the main problem was that the temporary levee made it impossible to use Highways 74 and 25.

He said the plastic floodwall would not be of much use to them.

"Any solution would have to be permanent to keep the highways open," Moss said. "I don't know anything about this product, but a temporary floodwall doesn't do anything to keep the highways open. It would still have to go across the highway."

Moss said the only solution is a permanent levee. The federal money is in place and the plans are drawn. They're

waiting on local money to be approved in a state grant, and he hopes that will be finalized between July and September.

The levee is expected to cost almost \$1 million and would be finished about a year from the time the block grant is approved.

The plastic floodwall project, which is to be marketed nationally, is important to Spartech Plastics, said Greg S. Nagel, business manager for the central region, which has locations in Cape Girardeau, Arlington, Texas, and Wichita, Kan.

If the government buys the plastic floodwall, Nagel said it would mean more jobs locally and nationwide for Spartech.

"It would be good for flood-prone areas," Nagel said. "But it would be good growth for our business. It's truly a quick fix."

Geocell is donating 200 feet of rapid deployment floodwall to the city of Cape Girardeau, and they estimate that at about a \$10,000 value.

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