

Geocell Demonstrates Rapid Deployment Flood Wall in St. Louis, Missouri

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Plastic wall is put to a flooding test against sandbags

It takes minutes, not hours, to erect

BY ALEXA AGUILAR
Of the Post-Dispatch

Crews in Crystal City dismantled a sandbag wall on Wednesday that took Vita Thompson and other volunteers 11 hours to build when water levels swelled earlier this month.

She understands the reality of having a business close to the river and knows that at any time, she may have to build a wall all over again.

But Thompson might be relieved from sandbagging duty in the future if the Army Corps of Engineers decides to purchase a new, modular plastic wall to add to the flood-fighting tool
See Flood wall, C7

Flood wall

*New kind of barrier
is touted as flood wall*

Continued from C1

kit it distributes to towns like Crystal City.

The corps, elected officials and community leaders went to the river's edge at the foot of Arsenal Street in St. Louis Thursday to see a demonstration of expandable plastic grids that are being promoted by three manufacturers as an alternative to sandbagging. Many in the audience came from communities that have experienced the backbreaking, tedious job of building a sandbag wall when floodwater came too close.

So has California contractor Al Arellanes, the product's developer. Arellanes has worked in flood management for the last 25 years. After observing the intense effort and sometimes ineffective result of sandbagging, he decided there had to be an alternative.

His inspiration for the wall sprang from the wine flats used to store bottles of wine. Arellanes decided to combine that design with the compactness of wet sand.

"It is not the plastic wall protecting you," Arellanes said, while three men stacked together enough plastic units to build a wall 4 feet high and 20 feet long in about 30 minutes. A wall that size is equivalent to about 1,000 sandbags.

"It's the sand doing the work," he said, while a small backhoe filled each grid with sand.

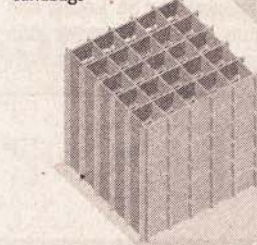
According to research by California's state flood center, a 35-person crew can build a sandbag wall 4 feet high and 100 feet long in about 19 hours. Using the flood wall, a seven-person crew can build the same wall in an hour.

That information was enough to win support for the wall from

Another way to stop a flood

The Rapid Deployment Flood Wall (right) is intended to replace or supplement sandbags during floods.

One single unit is equal to 37 sandbags



Rapid Deployment Flood Wall

Six laborers and one loader operator can construct a 4-foot-high and 100-foot long unit in one hour.

Rep. Jo Ann Emerson, R-Cape Girardeau, before she attended Thursday's demonstration. Emerson said she recently put in a request for funds to add extra money to the Army Corps budget to begin a pilot flood wall program. A representative for Rep. John Shimkus, R-Collinsville, said the congressman would be a vocal supporter as well.

Emerson and Shimkus both represent areas hard hit by the Flood of 1993. When river levels rose again earlier this month, Grafton, Alton, Crystal City and Dutchtown, Mo., were among the cites that experienced some flooding.

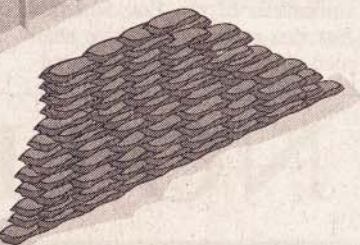
Arellanes said the cost of using the flood wall was comparable to sandbagging, considering the wall can be reused up to six times. Sandbags, however, usually are deposited in a landfill after one use.

The manufacturer, Geocell Inc. of California, in partnership with St. Louis-based Spartech Inc. and Georgia-based Eastman Chemical Co., is asking for \$12 million.

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After the unit is stacked six deep it is then filled with sand

Reusable, collapsible hard plastic



Sandbag wall

35 laborers can construct a 4-foot-high and 100-foot-long unit in 19.5 hours

MARK WILLIAMS/POST-DISPATCH

That amount would pay for about 16 miles of flood wall.

The cost is not really a factor to Eric Cowle, the public works director for Arnold. His town doesn't pay for its flood-fighting materials, it just picks them up from the Corps of Engineers.

Cost aside, though, Cowle said he was impressed with how quickly and efficiently the wall went up and said the walls would be much easier for untrained people to assemble.

Like many towns that were devastated in the Flood of 1993, Arnold, with the assistance of federal money, bought out many of the homes affected by floods. But the town's sanitary sewage system and a remaining dozen homes would be affected if another flood hits.

"It's reusable, and it's fast," Cowle said, as he watched the demonstration. "Half the homes don't build the sandbag walls right. If the floodwaters had come higher, those walls would have fallen over. This looks a lot simpler and faster."



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