

An Agency of Unchecked Clout

Water Projects Roll Past Economic, Environmental Concerns

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EAST PRAIRIE, Mo. -- The developer of a huge project to control flooding in Missouri's soggy southeastern boot-heel expects to drain 36,000 acres of wetlands along the Mississippi River. That's almost enough wetlands to cover the District of Columbia--and nearly twice as many as all of America's developers were permitted to touch last year.

The developer plans to plug a quarter-mile gap in an earthen levee to lock the river into its channel, then build two giant pumps to get rid of rain. But while the \$65 million venture is being promoted as an economic lifeline for water-weary East Prairie, the developer's fine print suggests this farm town will flood almost as often after it's built.

The consensus in the Clinton administration is that this megaproject must be stopped. "An environmental debacle," says a White House aide. "Absolutely ridiculous," scoffs Bill Hartwig, a regional Fish and Wildlife Service director. "A crazy idea," agrees James Lee Witt, head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. "Probably the dumbest project around," says a top Environmental Protection Agency official.

The Army Corps of Engineers is part of the Clinton administration, too. It is a public works agency in the Pentagon chain of command, reporting to an assistant Army secretary. It is also an environmental agency, legally responsible for protecting the nation's dwindling wetlands--ecologically sensitive areas ranging from seasonally flooded farmland to year-round swamps. But the Corps has a different take on the St. John's Bayou-New Madrid Floodway Project.

It's the developer.

And in many ways, this pariah of a project is par for the Corps, one of the oldest, largest and most unusual agencies in the federal government. It is an executive branch bureaucracy that takes marching orders from Congress, a military-run organization with an overwhelmingly civilian work force, an environmental regulator despised by environmentalists. The Corps has \$62 billion worth of civil works projects underway--three times the federal spending on cancer research over the last decade. It has about 35,000 employees--more than the Energy, Labor and Education departments put together.

This series will explore how an agency born as a regiment in George Washington's army has built clout in the city that bears his name, and how it uses that clout to reconfigure the American landscape. A Washington Post review of Corps activities across the nation, supported by more than 1,000 interviews and tens of thousands of pages of documents, found that the agency is converting its strong congressional relationships into billions of

dollars' worth of taxpayer-funded water projects, many with significant environmental costs and minimal economic benefits.

Members of Congress authorize the projects to steer federal money to their districts, and the Corps often justifies them with questionable technical studies. This pro-construction mentality has been fueled by Corps commanders, who have launched an agency-wide campaign to "seek growth opportunities," internal memos show. The result is a fragmented national network of channelized rivers and deepened ports, cobbled together by log-rolling and deal-cutting by individual lawmakers, instead of comprehensive planning by federal officials.

The East Prairie plan has the hallmarks of many of the Corps projects reviewed by The Post. It has fierce support from local residents as well as a fervent congressional advocate, Rep. Jo Ann Emerson (R-Mo.). The Corps justified it with a distorted cost-benefit analysis--the assumptions included a 2.5 percent interest rate that dates back to the Eisenhower administration--and deflected strong objections from environmental agencies. The bulk of the project's benefits will flow to a few well-connected local farmers, but the federal rules that would have forced them to help pay for it were waived in Washington. And despite the administration's outrage, the project may soon become a reality.

Corps commanders refused scores of interview requests, under orders from Gen. Joe Ballard, the agency's recently retired chief engineer. But in written responses to questions from The Post, and in their public statements, they have called the Corps a model of public service, firmly committed to promoting economic development, newly dedicated to conserving ecosystems and federal funds as well. They describe the Corps as an apolitical military organization, simply following orders produced by the democratic process.

Earlier this year--after a whistle-blower charged that Corps officials had manipulated an economic study to justify billion-dollar lock expansions on the Mississippi River, and after leaked documents showed that senior commanders had drawn up a "Project Growth Initiative" to boost the agency's budget and expand its missions--Ballard angrily told a Senate subcommittee that the Corps is not a "rogue agency."

"I am confident that the Army Corps of Engineers is pursuing its mission with the utmost professionalism and integrity, and will continue to serve this nation well," he said.

Almost all modern presidents have clashed with the Corps--and the Corps has usually won. Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, Johnson and Nixon all considered reforms that went nowhere. In 1977, President Carter tried to kill a "hit list" of 19 water projects, an effort that not only failed, but permanently damaged his relationship with Congress. In 1986, President Reagan did force Congress to make local communities pay more for Corps projects, but only in exchange for a costly new round of projects. This spring, President Clinton's Army secretary, Louis Caldera, tried to reaffirm executive branch control of the Corps, only to withdraw his proposed reforms a week later after a Capitol Hill backlash.

Now another intense battle is raging over the Corps--over who should control the agency, whether it should grow or shrink, and how much it should shift its focus from construction projects that degrade the environment to restoration projects that clean up old damage. It may not be the sexiest of Beltway brawls, but it will have a dramatic effect on America.

Corps levees and floodwalls protect millions of homes, farms and businesses. Its coastal ports and barge channels carry 2 billion tons of freight annually. Its dams generate one-fourth of America's hydroelectric power. Its water recreation sites attract more visitors than the National Park Service's. Its land holdings would cover Vermont and New Hampshire.

But the Corps may have its greatest impact on nature. It quietly presides over many of the nation's hottest environmental issues, from oil drilling on Alaska's North Slope to dam removal on the Snake River to water wars on the Missouri River to restoration of Florida's Everglades. It is in the thick of furors over endangered species, endangered rivers, ocean dumping, beach erosion, agricultural pollution, floodplain sprawl. It cleans up industrial and nuclear waste. In its regulatory role, it approves thousands of private projects that destroy modest amounts of wetlands; in its construction role, it is pushing several public projects that could destroy huge amounts of wetlands. So the future direction of the Corps will help determine the future health of America's environment.

To conservationists, that is not a comforting thought. They know the Corps as a dredge-and-destroy agency that builds massive dams, dikes and levees, domesticating wild rivers into straight and narrow barge canals. Its leaders have pledged to reinvent the Corps as a "greener" organization, but they still battle traditional environmental agencies on almost every major issue. To many environmentalists, the Corps is still Public Enemy Number One, and almost all of its major projects are still greeted with environmental lawsuits.

"The Corps still doesn't get it," said Hartwig, whose Fish and Wildlife regional office is fighting the project in East Prairie.

"They still think they can defeat Mother Nature with brilliant engineering. They talk about the environment, but they don't really believe in it." Joseph Westphal, the Clinton appointee who oversees the Corps, argues that it is unfair to dwell on the past, on ancient boondoggles built under orders from Congress in eras oblivious to ecological concerns. The real story, he says, is that the Corps has begun to appreciate the value of flora and fauna, and that its spending on environmental programs has quadrupled since 1992. The modern Corps is planting trees, creating wetlands, even dismantling a few of its dams, dikes and levees. It is restoring some of the river bends and backwaters it once wiped out, chauffeuring salmon past the fish-pulverizing dams it once built, and preparing to lead a \$7.8 billion effort to undo the damage it once inflicted upon the Everglades.

"I can't say there's as much progress as I'd like, but there's definitely progress, real progress," said Westphal, the assistant Army secretary for civil works.

Westphal, an amiable political science professor who once ran the congressional Sun Belt Caucus, is supposed to supervise the civil works program, but he has rarely intervened in Corps decisions. Even though the overwhelming majority of the agency's employees are civilians, military commanders run its 49 districts and divisions, where the real work gets done. And under Ballard, a three-star general who pounds out e-mails in capital letters, the Corps virtually declared independence from the Clinton administration.

So while the Corps is showing some signs of modernization, it is also marching ahead with a new round of old-style projects, from the world's largest water pump in the Mississippi Delta to the world's largest beach replenishment along the New Jersey coast, from a \$641 million lock replacement in a New Orleans canal to a \$377 million harbor deepening in Wilmington, N.C. Local interests propose the projects, and members of Congress ram them into law, but none of them could happen without the cooperation of the Corps.

The East Prairie project is particularly anachronistic, and not only because of its outsize impact on wetlands. Its main flood control protection is not for East Prairie, but for waterlogged farmland in a sparsely inhabited area called the New Madrid Floodway. It's called a floodway because in a serious Mississippi rise, the Corps is supposed to let the river overwhelm the entire 180-square-mile area to protect more populated river communities.

In other words, the Corps is now trying to provide flood protection for an area it may end up flooding on purpose.

"It's just insane," says Mark Boone, a fisheries biologist for the Missouri Department of Conservation. "It's like the rest of the world woke up, and the Corps is still asleep."

So on one hand, the federal government is paying people billions of dollars to move homes and businesses away from floodplains; on the other hand, the Corps is pushing an economic development project not only in a natural floodplain, but in an official floodway. Meanwhile, at a time when the nation is officially committed to restoring wetlands--which serve as kitchens and nurseries for countless species, filter water that ends up in faucets, and reduce flood damages by absorbing excess water--this project would destroy wetlands.

The project would also boost agricultural production in Missouri when the government is spending billions to take flood-prone farmland out of production--and billions more to prop up and bail out farmers suffering from low prices, which have been depressed by overproduction. And while an executive order by President Clinton promoted "nonstructural" approaches to reducing flood damages, this levee-and-pump project is decidedly structural. "On a lot of levels, the project makes no sense," said FEMA's Witt.

The Perennial Campaign

In the beginning the Mississippi ran free, meandering around hairpin turns, changing channels like a bored teenager. It was a complex river of sloughs, sandbars and side channels, flooding across its valley every spring, nourishing thick canopies of oak, cottonwood and cypress. Its bard, Mark Twain, wrote that mankind simply "cannot tame that lawless stream, cannot curb it or confine it, cannot say to it Go here or Go there, and make it obey.

"The Corps of Engineers has never accepted "cannot."

Today the river has been tamed into a reliable commercial waterway by the Corps, confined within earthen levees by the Corps, straightened and shortened and simplified by the Corps. Its valley has been cleared and converted from swampland to farmland, and cities have sprouted along its banks. It has been imprisoned into a single channel, where its barges float half the nation's inland freight. It's also a sick river.

Corps levees look like ordinary hills along the riverbank, but they have severed the Mississippi from more than 90 percent of its floodplain, eliminating millions of acres of wetlands that had attracted fish, shorebirds and other wildlife. Dams and dikes that stabilized the main barge channel have degraded biologically diverse back channels. The river's water quality has deteriorated steadily, pouring pesticides into the Gulf of Mexico's oxygen-deprived "dead zone." And changes in sediment flows have depleted Louisiana's coastal marshes, which are vanishing so fast that some experts are calling for a restoration project twice the size of the Everglades mission.

The story of the Mississippi is in many ways the story of the Corps' civil works program, which has focused on the river ever since Congress inaugurated it with \$75,000 in 1824. The transformation of the Mississippi reflects the can-do genius of the Corps, an energetic military organization that fortified Bunker Hill, built the Washington Monument, surveyed the West, dug the Panama Canal and supervised the Manhattan Project. (Its motto, "Essayons," is French for "Let us try.") But it also illustrates the hubris of the Corps, an agency that has historically treated nature as an enemy to be conquered, equating engineering and control with progress.

Today, its leaders speak about "working in harmony with nature," but the Corps still proudly mobilizes for its "Annual Campaign Against the Mighty Mississippi." Burton Kemp, a former Corps geologist in Mississippi, says no one should be surprised when the agency takes a militaristic approach to the environment. "I'm afraid it's not the Corps of Scientists. It's not the Corps of Biologists," he sighed.

"It's the Corps of Engineers." The Annual Campaign began in earnest after the Civil War, when a headstrong Corps general named Andrew Humphreys, fresh from losing half his division in the Union's disastrous charge at Fredericksburg, launched his equally disastrous "levees-only" policy for controlling the Mississippi. As John Barry recounted in his history, "Rising Tide," the plan was revealed as a colossal blunder in the 1927 flood, when levee breaks left nearly 1 million people homeless and 16 million acres underwater. Humphreys underestimated the power of the Mississippi, which drains two

of every five drops of rain that fall on the continental United States. His levees cut off the river's outlets, so all that water squeezed between them had nowhere to go but up.

Nevertheless, Congress gave the Corps full power over the river in 1928, and the agency revised its strategy. It continued to strengthen and extend the Mississippi levees--they are now longer than the Great Wall of China--but it also built a system of reservoirs, cutoffs and diversions to ease the pressure on them. The system included the New Madrid Floodway, an emergency relief valve, 180 extra square miles of room for the river to spread out over in case of high water.

The plan called for the river to enter the floodway up in Birds Point, where the Corps would dynamite a hole in the levee, and return to its channel down in New Madrid, where the Corps left a 1,500-foot gap in the levee. The Corps executed the plan in 1937, and it helped save upstream communities such as Cairo, Ill. In 1997, the Corps again had barges loaded with explosives and ready to blow, but the upstream flood subsided just in time.

Here in the waterlogged agricultural bootheel of southeast Missouri, though, that gap is about as popular as the corn borer or boll weevil. The Corps has used the emergency plan to drown the area only once. But the Mississippi backs through the gap and into the floodway almost every spring, damaging crops, blocking roads, flushing thick streams of wriggling fish into the fields. The area is still known as Swampeast Missouri, and its residents see the gap as a physical symbol of unfairness, a separation between them and better-off, better-educated, better-protected communities.

The floodway project would finally close the gap.

"The Corps built flood control for everyone else: It's our turn now," says Martha Ellen Black, director of a family support center in East Prairie. "We don't deserve to live like people in a Third World country. We have a right to equal protection."

Closing the Gap

East Prairie sent President Clinton a strange promotional video a few years ago, almost bragging that half its 4,000 residents have no high school diploma, that a third of them live in poverty. "Living the American Dream in East Prairie is a little harder," the narrator intoned. Today, town officials eagerly show off 1989 photographs of the public housing authority's offices underwater, of the nursing home surrounded by sandbags, of national champion oak trees drowning in an eight-foot deluge. Floods, they say, are the root of their problems.

And the Corps project is supposed to change everything.

Locals expect it to attract new businesses, ensure emergency access, promote tourism, bolster schools, revive civic pride, even stop mysterious waterborne fungal infections. And while East Prairie is not actually located in the floodway, supporters are quick to cite the project's benefits for the largest town that is, Pinhook, whose 52 residents all happen

to be black; they settled in the floodway because whites wouldn't sell them land anywhere else.

The entire area considers the project a matter of survival--and an entitlement, since every other community along the Mississippi seems to have a Corps project. So Rep. Emerson has carried on a crusade begun by her late husband and predecessor, Rep. Bill Emerson, relentlessly pressuring Corps officials, lunching with Westphal, steering funds the project's way. She has also led the fight on Capitol Hill against the administration's efforts to "green" the Corps.

"The elite environmentalist types want to disenfranchise these people, but I'm going to fight for them," said Emerson, a former restaurant industry lobbyist who is a member of the Appropriations Committee. "They're an endangered species, too, as much as any of these mussels or fish or whatever."

Congress first authorized the levee closure in 1954, but the Corps never got the go-ahead to move dirt. Then in 1986, Bill Emerson tacked an expanded project into the Water Resources Development Act. That was not hard for a member of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, which oversees the Corps. On Capitol Hill, it is still considered almost bad form to oppose a water project in another member's district, much less a mere authorization, which does not ensure funding. Corps authorizations have long been viewed as congressional prerogatives, nearly as automatic as the franking privilege or special license plates.

But 1986 was the year President Reagan challenged the prerogative, holding a pork-loaded water bill hostage until Congress agreed to boost local cost-sharing requirements. That put the floodway project on hold, because the "local sponsor," the area's levee board, could not pay its share. The break came in 1994, when Clinton declared ailing East Prairie a rural "enterprise community," and Bill Emerson drafted an amendment allowing federal enterprise funds to cover most of the project's local burden. His amendment became law after his death in 1996, and Vice President Gore's office approved the use of federal funds for the project.

So the Corps began a study.

The Corps is supposed to conduct objective studies of proposed water projects, but it also has an obvious interest in their outcome, since it only gets to build the projects it deems worthwhile. The agency's "Strategic Vision" specifically urges Corps commanders to "target new work," and several regional commanders have pledged to set specific goals for mission and budget growth. So there is a strong incentive for Corps study managers to reach pro-project conclusions: If they don't, key legislators get angry and the Corps doesn't grow.

In fact, one Corps memo last year announced that in order to "grow the civil works program," generals in headquarters and the Mississippi Valley Division had agreed to "get creative" with economic and environmental studies. "They will be looking for ways

to get [studies] to 'yes' as fast as possible," it declared. "We have been encouraged to have our study managers not take 'no' for an answer. The push to grow the program is coming from the top down." And the administration has delegated all technical oversight of Corps studies back to the Corps; Westphal merely provides "policy review," and rarely alters recommendations.

The East Prairie study was assigned to the Memphis District, which is part of the Mississippi Valley Division. In April 1999, the district reached a preliminary conclusion that the benefits slightly outweighed the costs. Last week, the Corps issued its final report, conceding that the project would cause "some loss in wetland function and value" but proposing to "overcompensate" for the losses by planting oak trees on 9,500 acres.

"The Corps says this is a worthwhile project," said Terry Redfering, president of the local Chamber of Commerce. "What else is there to say?"

Quite a bit, according to environmentalists, anti-tax activists, scientists and economists. They point out that the Corps justified the project with 1996 crop prices, which have plummeted. It justified the levee portion with a 1954 interest rate, which has tripled. (The agency says it used the rate from the year the levee was first authorized.)

Corps documents also suggest the project will have little impact on most of East Prairie itself. The agency's analysts concluded that the town is now subject to flooding about once a decade--and will still be subject to flooding about once a decade when the project is done.

Instead, the Corps found that more than 90 percent of the project's benefits would go to local corn and soybean farmers, who could increase their yields a bit if they didn't have to worry about floods. According to county land maps, the five farmers on the levee board, the "local sponsor," own more than 15,000 acres in the affected floodplain. But when the nonprofit group Environmental Defense proposed a cheaper alternative designed to improve East Prairie's drainage but leave the already subsidized farmland alone, the Corps said no.

"This project is agricultural drainage masquerading as urban flood control," says Environmental Defense senior attorney Tim Searchinger. "It's a federal gift to a few special interests."

Meanwhile, biologists describe the project as an environmental catastrophe. It would break the last natural connection to the Mississippi between Cape Girardeau, Mo., and Helena, Ark., eliminating Missouri's last swath of backwater floodplain with direct access to the river. It would cut off the seasonal floods that sustain the area's giant bottomland hardwoods--and help fish spawn outside the Mississippi's punishing currents.

Overall, the Corps predicted the project will only eliminate 167 acres of wetlands overall, an estimate Searchinger said was "directly contradicted" by the agency's own data. The Corps acknowledged that it would reduce flooding on 8,000 acres of forested wetlands

and 28,000 acres of agricultural wetlands. By contrast, in its regulatory role under the Clean Water Act, the Corps permitted more than 4,000 development projects last year, affecting less than 22,000 acres of wetlands.

The EPA has ranked the floodway project "environmentally unsatisfactory," its worst rating. The Fish and Wildlife Service and the Missouri Department of Conservation have been vehemently opposed, too. Robert Sheehan and Katie Dugger, scientists whose research the Corps relied on in its environmental analysis, have submitted affidavits flatly disputing that analysis, warning of severe impacts to mussels, fish and endangered least terns. Scientists and federal agencies have also said the Corps plan to "mitigate" the damages with reforestation is inadequate even if it works, and that it probably won't work.

Community leaders reply that agricultural wetlands shouldn't count as real wetlands, and that the project's opponents care more about shorebirds and fish than people. On a tour in his plane, Dee Dill, a farmer on the levee board, pointed out miles of cornfields puddled with rain. "This area isn't a swamp anymore; it's an agricultural community," he said. "It's fine if you want to save the world, but don't do it at our expense."

On a tour in a Missouri Department of Conservation skiff, David Wissehr, a wildlife biologist, showed the area from a different angle. He pointed out angular terns swooping into streams and ditches for fish, squeaking like trampolines. A silver carp jumped two feet out of a bayou. Great blue herons flapped above the oaks. "This is a special place, and there aren't a lot like it anymore," he said. "Cut it off from the river, and you kill it."

'America's River'

This spring, the White House went to war with the Corps over the Mississippi River.

The battleground was a draft presidential order directing the Corps to "chart a new direction" for the river. The directive noted that studies have attributed half the nation's wetland losses to Corps projects along the Mississippi. It said that "the benefits of flood damage reduction have come at great expense to the floodplain and riverine ecosystems associated with the Mississippi River, which we have come to know as America's River.

"The directive also would have forced the Corps to adopt higher environmental standards, review all projects affecting more than 500 acres of wetlands, and "ensure that federal water resource projects do not work against the purposes of other major federal programs, projects and expenditures.

"In other words, it would have halted projects like East Prairie's.

Then Emerson found out about it. She promptly wrote a scathing letter to Clinton, calling the draft language "an extraordinary and damaging expansion of executive authority" and warning that it would "seriously undermine" federal antipoverty initiatives in the Mississippi Delta. She rounded up a bipartisan coalition of 45 co-signers. Rep. Bud

Shuster (R-Pa.), the chairman of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, wrote his own blistering letter of protest. So did Sen. Christopher Bond (R-Mo.), the most aggressive supporter of the Mississippi River lock expansions further upstream.

That was the last anyone has heard about the "new direction" order. White House aides say it's on hold. "There's too much political heat," one said. They are afraid that if Clinton issues it, Congress will just block it with legislation.

"I think it's buried. I hope it's buried," Emerson said.

Emerson believes the Corps should stick to its current direction: controlling rivers, valuing farmers over wildlife, turning uninhabited wetlands into productive dry land. Corps defenders say that without its herculean efforts to reroute water, there would be no future for floodplain communities such as Omaha or St. Louis or New Orleans--or Pinhook, the little town in the floodway. Jim Robinson, the patriarch of Pinhook, believes that if the Corps can close the levee gap, blacks from all over Missouri will flock to the area, reviving his tiny community.

But environmentalists point out that the floodway was never supposed to attract a revival; it was supposed to remain undeveloped. That's the flip side of Corps flood control projects: They can instill a false sense of security, luring pioneers into floodplains, accelerating demands for even more protection. Despite \$100 billion worth of Corps projects, flood emergencies, damages and deaths are on the rise, and the federal government is spending more money than ever to move Americans out of harm's way. Meanwhile, most of the wetlands of the Mississippi basin have been drained by farmers or paved by developers, often with Corps permits. That means that most of the runoff from 31 states and two Canadian provinces now flows straight to the river, which means that it takes less water to create a horrific flood.

"We could be headed for 1927 all over again," warned Ron Nassar, coordinator of the Lower Mississippi Valley Conservation Committee, a group representing natural resource agencies from eight states. "This is a turning point for the Corps."

Environmentalists and administration officials want the Corps to turn from structural flood "control" to non-structural flood damage reduction: buying and reforesting floodplain farmland, waterproofing and elevating homes and roads, leaving nature to its own devices and moving people away from water. The idea is to save wildlife while reducing the amount of marginal farmland and river's-edge development the government needs to bail out after floods, and spending less money on giant engineering projects.

The president's Council on Environmental Quality is no longer pressing to revamp the Corps approach to flood control. But it is still considering a move to hold up three particularly intrusive structural projects. One is the floodway plan in Missouri. The other two are in the Mississippi Delta itself: the Big Sunflower River dredging project and the Yazoo Pump. The \$62 million Big Sunflower initiative could endanger an ancient mussel colony believed to be the world's densest concentration of living creatures. The original

plan for the \$181 million pump proposed to drain three times as much wetlands acreage as the floodway project in Missouri.

The three projects are all designed to divert water away from farmers, to help them increase their yields. But the farm economy is swooning, despite record yields and record levels of federal largess. Sam Hamilton, the Fish and Wildlife Service's Southeast regional director, recently suggested in a harsh letter to the Corps that the agrarian status quo is "unsustainable" and that its policies have been "instrumental in transforming" an ecologically vibrant Mississippi River ecosystem "into a region that is considered impoverished by most social, economic and environmental standards."

But even if Clinton does try to stop the projects before his term ends, he will have to contend with Emerson, not to mention Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) and Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Thad Cochran (R-Miss.), the protectors of the Delta projects. As Sen. George Voinovich (R-Ohio) blurted out at a recent hearing, the Corps doesn't necessarily answer to the president. Voinovich, chairman of the subcommittee that oversees the Corps, pointedly reminded his colleagues who really decides which water projects become reality.

"We don't care what the Corps cost-benefit is," Voinovich said. "We're going to build it anyhow because Congress says it's going to be built. Somebody's in charge of some appropriations committee, or another committee, and jams it through."

About This Series:

TODAY: LANDSCAPING AMERICA: How the Corps of Engineers has launched tens of billions of dollars worth of water projects around America, including many that damaged the environment.

MONDAY: CODDLING CONGRESS: How the Corps has developed quid-pro-quo relationships with key Congressmen, executing questionable projects in their districts and yielding to them on regulatory decisions.

TUESDAY: DREDGING FOR DATA: How Corps planners have manipulated environmental and cost-benefit studies to justify massive projects, including the dredging of ports in Baltimore and along the East Coast.

WEDNESDAY: PERMITTING POLLUTION: How the Corps has subordinated its responsibility to protect America's wetlands while granting thousands of permits for development in Alaska.

THURSDAY: RESTORING NATURE: How the Corps is seeking to reverse the damage it once did to Florida's Everglades, even as it struggles over its own future. East Prairie Project By closing a gap in a levee and building two pumps, the Corps would help protect farmland near East Prairie but would do little to help the town itself. Its flooding problems are mostly caused by poor drainage of rainwater, not infiltration by the river. A

small fraction of the project's cost would go to deepen a drainage ditch, which would provide some benefit to East Prairie.

SOURCES: Army Corps of Engineers, Environmental Defense

The Corps' Controversial Projects

New Orleans Industrial Canal lock replacement

This \$641 million project would be one of the most expensive locks ever built. It was justified in March 1997 by projections that barge traffic would gradually increase, even though traffic had been dropping for a decade. And it has continued to decline so fast that the project can no longer be justified with Corps data. The Corps also cited safety concerns, but the National Transportation Safety Board says the new lock "would not necessarily reduce the hazards." Local activists believe the 10-year project will ruin two historic black neighborhoods. But former House Appropriations Committee chairman Robert Livingston (R-La.) is pushing the project as a lobbyist for the Port of New Orleans, and the Corps is forging ahead.

Oregon Inlet jetties

The Corps wants to build two jetties to protect fishing boats in North Carolina's Outer Banks. The fleet has 215 commercial vessels, so the \$108 million project, authorized in 1970, would cost about \$500,000 per boat. The Interior Department believes it would cause serious erosion problems on Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge and Cape Hatteras National Seashore, so it has refused to allow the Corps to build the jetties from its land. This summer, Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) tried to slip an amendment into a budget bill to transfer the land to the Corps, but Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.) blocked it.

Deer Creek Debris Basin

The Corps completed this Southern California flood control project in 1982, but it is embroiled in a new controversy. The project was supposed to cost \$28 million and protect San Bernardino County neighborhoods from the kind of flood that happens once every 200 years. It ended up costing \$140 million, and recent evaluations have found the basin will only withstand a 20-year flood. Robert Kirby, a former Corps employee who helped design the project, called the project unsafe in a recent affidavit: "I am very concerned that homes, business and schools could be damaged and people could suffer if the problems . . . are not rectified immediately."

Pentagon renovations

The Army Corps may be a Pentagon agency, but it was fired from the \$1.2 billion Pentagon renovation project this year. Technically, it quit, but only after the Defense Department's project manager, Walker Lee Evey, sharply cut back its role, complaining that it wasn't flexible enough for the job. Evey says he constrained the Corps because it

wasn't "responding to challenges," because it couldn't handle having a secondary role in the project, and because it represents "the old way of doing major construction projects."

Upper Mississippi lock expansions

Donald Sweeney, a Corps economist, led a five-year study of proposed \$1 billion lock expansions on the Mississippi and Illinois rivers. But when he concluded the costs would far outweigh the benefits, senior Corps commanders took him off the study. In February, The Post published Corps e-mails that showed how officials then launched a campaign "to develop evidence or data to support a defensible set of . . . projects," announcing that if the economics did not "capture the need for navigation improvements, then we have to find some other way to do it." The alleged misconduct is the subject of several investigations, and two independent economic analyses have upheld Sweeney's view that the project is unnecessary.

Apalachicola River navigation

The Corps has channelized dozens of rivers for barges that never arrived, and the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint River system in Georgia and Florida is a conspicuous example. The Corps still spends nearly \$3 million a year dredging it, killing fish and damaging endangered mussel beds, but it only floats a few barges a week. In January, when The Post chronicled the plight of "low-volume waterways" such as the Red, White and Missouri rivers, Assistant Army Secretary Joseph Westphal vowed to reevaluate the entire navigation system. Now he has made the A-C-F his first target, declaring in letters to Rep. Robert L. Barr Jr. (R-Ga.) and Sen. Bob Graham (D-Fla.) that maintaining both rivers for barges is "not economically justified or environmentally defensible."

A Brief History of the Corps

1775: Gen. George Washington appoints a chief engineer to direct the fortification of Bunker Hill early in the Revolutionary War. The nation's engineers would participate in every American war that followed.

1802: President Thomas Jefferson establishes the Corps to run the nation's only engineering school, at West Point. The Corps also builds forts and coastal batteries, and leads early surveying expeditions of the West.

1824: Congress establishes a civil works program for the Corps, beginning with snagging and clearing the Ohio and Mississippi rivers for year-round navigation.

1861: The Civil War begins, featuring an all-star team of Corps alumni on both sides: Lee, McClellan, Meade, Johnston, Beauregard, Pope, Fremont. The end of the war ushers in a new era of civil works: river navigation, flood control levees, harbor improvements and surveys. The Corps also takes over public works for the war-torn District of Columbia, and completes the Washington Monument and Library of Congress.

1914: The Corps finishes digging the Panama Canal, a project abandoned by the French in 1889.

1928: Congress gives the Corps full power over the Mississippi River after the disastrous '27 flood. The New Deal launches another civil works frenzy, including giant dams on the Missouri, Illinois and Columbia rivers.

1941: The Corps helps lead America's mass mobilization for World War II, and supervises the Manhattan Project, which produced the atomic bomb. After the war, the Corps returns to civil works, building the [St. Lawrence Seaway](#), Cape Canaveral and the canal system that drained the Everglades to supply South Florida's water, while designing and building Cold War missile sites and radar networks.

1972: Congress passes the Clean Water Act, requiring developers who want to dredge or fill America's wetlands to seek permits from the Corps. The agency continues to build huge dams on the Snake and Red rivers and the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, but it also begins a few environmental restoration programs.

2000: The Pentagon investigates allegations that Corps officials rigged a \$58 million study of Mississippi River improvements. The Clinton administration tries to reassert executive branch control of the Corps but retreats after furious opposition from Congress. The Corps prepares to lead a \$7.8 billion project to undo some of the damage it did to the Everglades, the biggest environmental restoration plan in history.

Within the agency:\$11 billion annual budget 8 geographic divisions 41 subordinate districts 34,500 civilian employees 600 military employees

The agency controls:11.7 million acres of land 12,000 miles of waterways 4,400 recreation areas 8,500 miles of levees 300 deep draft ports 75 operational hydropower projects

SOURCE: Army Corps of Engineers

Civil Works Spending

Breakdown of Corps' \$4.1 billion civil works appropriations:

IN MILLIONS

\$149 Other

\$117 Regulatory program

\$150 Radioactive waste cleanup

\$162 Investigations

\$309 Mississippi River and tributaries

\$1,401 Construction

\$1,854 Operations and maintenance

SOURCE: Army Corps of Engineers

The Constricted Floodplain

Corps levees along the Mississippi River and many of its tributaries have severed the river from more than 90 percent of its floodplain. The levees have cleared the way for productive farmland and vibrant cities, but they have also eliminated millions of acres of foraging and spawning habitat for scores of aquatic species and the animals that eat them.

SOURCE: Lower Mississippi River Conservation Committee