

Grave Decisions

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The Corps of Engineers last night activated the Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway - a roughly 130,000 acre, 3 to 10 mile-wide, floodway inside a 56-mile-long 'frontline' levee along the Mississippi River and a 36-mile long setback levee. There is a 1,500-foot gap where the two levees would come together down river, to allow the floodway to drain back into the Mississippi River. This gap also allows the Mississippi River to back into its floodplain providing exceptional (and now unfortunately rare) wildlife habit.

To activate the New Madrid Floodway, the Corps fills in pre-drilled holes with explosives and literally explodes the levee at Birds Point, just south of Cairo, IL. The floodway is designed to divert 550,000cfs from the Mississippi River during a "project flood" (defined as the maximum flood with a reasonable chance of occurring) to relieve pressure on the entire flood control system, and reduce flood heights regionally in Cairo, Il and other nearby towns.

The New Madrid Floodway is one of four floodways that the Corps designed into the Mississippi Rivers and Tributaries Project (MR&T) – the entire flood control system that Congress authorized in 1928 following the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. The MR&T levee system extends along the Mississippi River all of the way from the bootheal of Missouri to the Gulf of Mexico affecting a 35,000 sq. mile project area.

Use of the New Madrid floodway has always been controversial and this time around is no exception. Yesterday was only the second time in history the floodway has been used by the Corps. The first time was in 1937, and at that time, a handful of the 3,000 residents that inhabited the floodway had to be forcibly removed by the National Guard to protect workers working to breach the levee to activate the floodway. Today, there are roughly 200 inhabitants in the floodway engaged in agribusiness mostly producing soy beans.



I took this picture of a noble cypress stand in Big Oak Tree State Park, a thousand-acre bottomland hardwood forest in the New Madrid Floodway in Sept. 2009. We traveled to the area to meet with Cairo officials about how the Corps' proposal to close the 1,500 to gap would cut off flows into the Park and at least 75,000 acres in the floodway while putting Cairo at greater risk of flooding.

The federal government has compensated floodway inhabitants by purchasing flowage easement to flood their land, and the government is required to compensate landowners within all of the MR&T project floodways who would be subjected "to additional destructive floodwaters that will pass by reason of diversion" from the Mississippi River. However as we have seen, using the floodway is never an easy thing to do, whether you are talking about flooding 3,000 people in 1927 or flooding 200 people today.

In 1937 when the Corps last activated the floodway, Maj. Gen. Edward Markham, Chief of Engineers testified before the House Committee on Flood Control that, "I am now of the opinion that no plan is satisfactory which is based upon deliberately turning floodwaters upon the home and property of people, even though the right to do so may have been paid for in advance."

Just yesterday in a Mississippi River Commission statement announcing the operation of the floodway, Maj. Gen. Michael J. Walsh, Commander of the Corps' Mississippi Valley Division stated, "Making this decision is not easy or hard – it's simply grave – because the decision leads to loss of property and livelihood – either in a floodway – or in an area that was not designed to flood."

So the question is how do we avoid putting people, whether 3,000 in 1937 or 200 today, intentionally in harm's way?

One way is to treat the Mississippi River and its floodplain better. Continued manipulation of the River by navigation and agribusinesses throughout the Mississippi and Ohio basins to "get the water off the fields" as fast as possible has continued to increase flooding risks year-by-year, decade-by-decade, leading to this kind of situation. The 1927 flood took months of sustained and unyielding rain to bring both Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to flood stage. Today's flood has already exceeded the 1927 flood at the Cairo gage, and it only took a matter of days.

Maintaining the Mississippi River floodways as unencumbered floodways is critical. Will post disaster recovery funds be made available to the remaining inhabitants in the floodway to give them the choice to move out of the floodway? Or maybe even a more urgent question is what federally-subsidized projects are being proposed that would exacerbate flooding risks in the floodway.

The St. John's Bayou / New Madrid Floodway Project, a Corps proposal to close that 1,500 ft. gap at the bottom of the floodway in order to intensify agriculture production in the floodway, is a looming threat to wildlife habitat, public safety and a waste of tax dollars. Any attempts to revive this project as part of the post-disaster response should be strongly resisted.

A group of professors from Southern Illinois University penned a letter to President Obama on May 2, 2011 outlining "the much higher potential value of the floodplain to US society if it is left open to the river and allowed to be inundated regularly." Doing so, they argue, would reduce flood risks to upstream towns by allowing the Mississippi River to spread out again instead of being confined through the main levee channel, create recreational opportunities from new fish and wildlife habitat created by the new wetland, and it would capture pollutants like nitrogen which would benefit the health of the Gulf of Mexico.

As our nation faces increasing flooding threats from climate change, increasing land use, navigation structures, and other factors, we should start embracing a growth policy that allows "Room for Rivers" -- retreating from their floodplains rather than continuing to develop upon them. To do so would avoid having to make the "grave decisions" to turn waters loose on our fellow citizens.

George Sorvalis the Coordinator of the Water Protection Network, a coalition of hundreds of organizations from around the country working to ensure water projects and policies and environmentally and economically sound.