

# TIME Swampland

Political Insight from the Beltway and Beyond

## VIEWPOINT

## After Birds Point: The Army Corps' Missouri Floodway Boondoggle

By MICHAEL GRUNWALD Friday, May 6, 2011 | 22 COMMENTS



E. JASON WAMBSGANS / CHICAGO TRIBUNE / MCT / LANDOV

On Monday, I temporarily suspended [my longstanding jihad](#) against the Army Corps of Engineers to [defend the agency's controversial decision](#) to blow up a Mississippi River levee and flood 130,000 acres of Missouri farmland. The situation upstream remains scary, but it would be even scarier if the Corps hadn't done its legal and ethical duty.

But now let's return to my regularly scheduled jihad, because the mess in Missouri is shining a spotlight on one of the most outrageous Corps boondoggles: a \$100 million slice of pork that even internal Corps memos [have described](#) as "swine" and "a bad project. Period."

It was justified through blatant data-cooking by the Corps, shut down by an angry federal judge, and allowed to die by an embarrassed Bush administration. Inexplicably, the Obama Administration has brought it back to life. Hopefully, the events of the last week will kill it for good.

In 2000, when I was young and childless and had nothing better to do than write a 50,000-word newspaper series about the dysfunction of the Corps, the St. John's Bayou-New Madrid Floodway levee-and-pump project was [my Exhibit A](#). It was almost too dumb, ecologically destructive and transparently deceptive to believe. It was, as a top Corps official later [wrote in an internal email](#), "an economic dud with huge environmental consequences."

"Huge" was putting it mildly. Corps documents suggested the project would drain more acres of wetlands than all U.S. developers drained in a typical year, cutting off one of the last swath of Mississippi River floodplain that was still connected to the river. The Fish and Wildlife Service warned that it "would cause substantial, irretrievable losses of nationally significant fish and wildlife resources, and greatly diminish rare and unique habitats in southeastern Missouri." And the mitigation plan was a joke.

"Dud" was also putting it mildly. The project was marketed as a flood-control initiative for the downtrodden community of East Prairie, Mo.; Congress even let East Prairie use its federal economic development dollars for the local cost-share. But Corps documents showed that East Prairie, which flooded once every ten years before the project, would still flood once every ten years after the project. The main economic benefits would accrue to large landowners in the New Madrid floodway, who would get federal flood protection for their federally subsidized corn and soybeans. And the cost to taxpayers was so high that the Corps still had to use an interest rate from the project's original inception in 1954 to nudge the benefit-cost ratio above 1 – to a grand total of 1.01.

The Corps loves porkbarrel water projects that keep its employees busy, its congressional patrons happy and its special-interest clients wealthy. But this one time, its efforts to concoct a legal and mathematical rationale were as obvious as they were illegal. Environmentalists kept catching third-grade errors in the various Corps plans to mitigate the project's ecological damage; the agency had to do six environmental impact statements before it could start construction. And in 2007, a federal judge issued an extraordinary order for the Corps not only to stop construction, but to undo the work it had done. "The Corps of Engineers has resorted to arbitrary and capricious reasoning – manipulating models and changing definitions where

necessary – to make this project seem compliant with the Clean Water Act and the National Environmental Policy Act when it is not,” he wrote.

The analysis, the judge said, “gives new meaning to the phrase ‘result-oriented decisionmaking.’” Or as one Corps official admitted: “There is a tail-wagging-the-dog element to this project.”

To its credit, the Bush administration, which had kept the project going for years, declined to appeal. But at a time when federal expenditures are supposedly under intense scrutiny, the Obama administration has allowed the Corps to proceed with a seventh environmental impact statement. The results-oriented decision-makers are getting one last chance to determine their own result.

But now there’s one last chance for sanity to prevail. The farms that the Corps is trying to protect with this project are sitting in the very floodway that the Corps just flooded on purpose when it blew up the Birds Point levee. That’s the whole point of a floodway. It’s an outlet valve for the river during emergencies. Why on earth would the federal government want to subsidize more intense agriculture (and ultimately development) in an area it might have to sacrifice in an emergency?

The farmers who bought land in Missouri’s waterlogged bootheel knew what they were buying; periodic floods and occasional wipeouts were priced into their purchases. But after their lobbying efforts and lawsuits failed to persuade the Corps to sacrifice the people of Cairo, Ill., instead of their high-priced dirt, they are now **preparing another lawsuit**, insisting that the Corps has trampled their constitutional property rights. (Are loan deficiency payments in the Constitution? How about federally subsidized crop insurance? Just asking.) It’s a shame when anyone gets flooded, and I remember meeting some nice people in the bootheel when I visited 11 years ago. I also remember some of them saying that if they could just get decent flood control for the floodway, they could have a real development boom there.

If that happened, of course, the Corps would never be able to sacrifice the floodway again. Then the river would decide what would be sacrificed.

**Related Topics:** [army corps of engineers](#), [birds point levee](#), [cairo illinois](#), [mississippi river](#), [missouri](#), [new madrid floodway](#), [Viewpoint](#)

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