

Dump the Yazoo Pumps Rider

Rider Directs Immediate Construction of One of the Most Wasteful and Environmentally Harmful Water Projects in History

The Yazoo Pumps Rider directs the Army Corps of Engineers to “immediately” initiate construction of a \$300 to \$438 million¹ drainage project that is so damaging it was vetoed by the George W. Bush Administration. This rider requires the Corps to take money away from high priority projects to drain and damage 200,000 acres of ecologically rich waterfowl habitat in the Mississippi Delta so large landowners can increase agricultural production on marginal lands that have always flooded.

- **Massive Wetland Destruction:** The Yazoo Pumps would drain and damage up to 200,000 acres of ecologically rich wetlands in the Mississippi Delta—an area larger than all 5 boroughs of New York City.² Wetlands would be drained on tens of thousands of acres of National Forest lands, National Wildlife Refuge lands, Wetlands Reserve and Conservation Reserve Program lands, and mitigation lands for previously constructed federal water projects. The George W. Bush Administration used the Clean Water Act to veto the project in 2008 after determining that the Yazoo Pumps would cause “unacceptable damage” to “some of the richest wetland and aquatic resources in the nation.” The rider throws out the protections provided by this veto and all other environmental laws, and eliminates any future administrative review, judicial review, and public comment.
- **De Facto Earmark Diverts Appropriated Funds Away from High Priority Projects:** The rider will force the Corps to pull money away from high priority flood and storm damage reduction projects to drain wetlands so large landowners can increase production on marginal lands that have always flooded. Many of these landowners already receive substantial farm subsidy payments. Funding would come from monies appropriated for flood damage reduction projects or from the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018, which appropriates \$400 million for construction of Mississippi River and Tributaries projects not damaged by natural disasters.
- **Overwhelming, Bi-Partisan Opposition:** Senator John McCain called the Yazoo Pumps “one of the worst projects ever conceived by Congress.” Already, 97 conservation organizations and more than 16,500 members of the public, including high profile Republicans from Mississippi,³ have opposed the rider. The extensive opposition that led to the 2008 Clean Water Act veto included: 120 conservation organizations; 540 independent scientists and the Society of Wetland Scientists; the Association of State Floodplain Managers; a former EPA Administrator; four former EPA Assistant Administrators for Water; a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works; and 99.9 percent of the 48,000 comments submitted on the Clean Water Act veto, including 90 percent of comments submitted by Mississippi residents. The Department of the Interior and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also strongly opposed the project. Mississippi’s largest newspaper, the *Clarion Ledger*, wrote five editorials and the *New York Times* wrote six editorials opposing the Yazoo Pumps.
- **A Bad Investment for the Nation:** The entire financial burden of the Yazoo Pumps—\$300 to \$438 million to construct plus more than \$2 million each year for at least the next 50 years to operate—rests on the federal taxpayers as there is no local share for the project. The Yazoo Pumps could not be economically justified even at the much lower 2008 projected price tag of \$220 million. An independent economic analysis showed that the project would do little more than “help landowners grow crops on land that is farmed only to earn farm subsidy payments” and would produce less than

14 cents of agricultural benefits for each dollar spent. The Yazoo Pumps would also lay waste to extensive federal investments by draining wetlands on National Wildlife Refuge lands, National Forest lands, Wetlands Reserve and Conservation Reserve Program lands, and on mitigation lands for other federal water resources projects.

- **Special Interest Giveaway:** The Yazoo Pumps are designed to drain wetlands so that large landowners can increase agricultural production on marginal lands that have always flooded. Fewer than 100 farms, averaging 1,000 acres each, could benefit from the project, and many of the landowners already receive substantial farm subsidy payments. In just the 2-year floodplain of the project area, 51 landowners split \$15.3 million in federal farm subsidies in the six years from 1996 through 2001. One landowner received \$2.7 million and four others each received more than \$1 million.
- **Hurts Communities in Mississippi and Louisiana:** Though touted as a flood control project, the Yazoo Pumps are not designed to save homes and lives and they will not reduce flood damages in communities located within the project area. Residential flooding in the project area is very limited as a result of other major Corps projects, with only 62 properties filing National Flood Insurance claims over the 24 year period from 1979 to 2002.⁴ Local communities will instead suffer from the project-induced reductions in water quality, lost wildlife habitat, and increased pesticide use in an area already plagued by toxic contamination. Downstream communities may also suffer from increased flooding as the project will pump six million gallons of water per minute into the Mississippi River when the river is already at flood stage.

Endnotes

¹ The Corps' 2007 Final Environmental Impact Statement estimated construction costs at more than \$220 million based on 2005 price levels. Updating these costs using the Corps' Civil Works Construction Cost Index and current mitigation costs puts the cost of construction plus compensatory mitigation at more than \$300.6 million based on 2018 price levels. The additional promised reforestation efforts brings the total project construction costs to \$438.5 million. Operations and maintenance costs are additional \$2.1+ million each year.

² The George W. Bush Administration vetoed the project based on the 67,000 acres of wetland impacts acknowledged by the Corps. However the Corps also admitted that they did not evaluate the full range of wetland impacts. EPA and independent hydrologists determined that the project would impact 200,000 acres of wetlands.

³ Mississippi Republicans opposing the rider include William Van Devender (CEO and Manager of CLAW Forestry Services) and Kelley Williams (former Chairman and CEO of ChemFirst Inc. and First Mississippi Corp.; Chair of the Bigger Pie Forum; and author of [Another Stacked Deck: The Yazoo Backwater Pumps Project](#), February 20, 2018).

⁴ Collectively, these repetitive loss properties filed 209 claims for damages totaling \$1.664 million.