

most urgent threats

Big Sunflower River Dredging and Yazoo Backwater Pump - Mississippi

Pork-barrel politics driving destruction of tens of thousands of acres of some of North America's richest wildlife habitat.

The Projects: The Big Sunflower River Dredging Project and Yazoo Backwater Pump combined will cost federal taxpayers \$243 million and damage, in a single location, more wetlands than private-sector development has nationwide in the past seven years. Riders in the FY 2003 and 2004 spending bills direct the Corps to contract for the design and purchase of the Yazoo Pump, even though the final environmental impact statement has not been completed.

The \$62 million Big Sunflower River "maintenance" project will dredge virtually the entire width of the river for 104 miles. Designed to reduce the duration of flooding primarily on sparsely populated, marginal farmland, the project would cost \$1,100 per acre benefited – more than most area farmland sells for outright. The dredging will destroy 43% of the river's rich mussel beds, severely impact 3,631 acres of wetlands,¹⁹⁴ and resuspend toxins accumulated in the river's sediments.

Downstream from the dredging, the \$181 million Yazoo Pump would drain and damage tens of thousands of acres of ecologically significant wetlands by lifting water over Corps flood control levees and discharging the water into the Yazoo River. Though touted as a flood control project, 83% of the claimed benefits are from increased agricultural production – primarily for soybeans on frequently-flooded lands – while protecting few homes and businesses.¹⁹⁵ The Corps' economic justification overstates the agricultural benefits alone by \$144 million.¹⁹⁶ (See "Ill-Conceived Flood Control Program" p. 20).

Each project is at 100% federal expense. The Corps contends the Big Sunflower is not new construction, but rather "maintenance" of an existing channel – even though the river will be dredged seven times longer than the original 14-mile channel. Project proponents slipped an obscure provision waiving the Yazoo Pump's local cost-share requirements into WRDA 1996.¹⁹⁷



The Big Sunflower River and Yazoo Pump projects threaten to destroy some of the most valuable bottomland hardwoods in the Mississippi Delta. Photo Credit: Ted Wood

Project Politics: Senators Thad Cochran and Trent Lott (R-MS) are the main congressional proponents. The Bush Administration recommended severe funding cuts in the FY 2003 and 2004 budgets, but Congress has allocated \$22 million for the Yazoo Pump and nearly \$7 million for the Big Sunflower River Dredging in the last two years.

Current Status: The Mississippi Supreme Court revoked the state's water quality permit issued for the Big Sunflower project due to concerns that the dredging will stir up sediments contaminated with dangerous pesticides. After significant public pressure, the Corps initiated a new supplemental environmental impact statement at the end of 2002.

The Corps has delayed releasing a final environmental impact statement for the Yazoo Pump, but it is expected within the year. In spring 2003, a local newspaper revealed that the flood control claims are greatly exaggerated and confirmed the project is essentially drainage to increase production on marginal, frequently flooded agriculture land.¹⁹⁸ If the Corps' final analysis fails to document the true environmental impacts, other federal agencies will need to intervene to protect the environment and taxpayers.

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¹⁹⁴ *Proposals for a Water Resources Development Act of 2002 Hearing Before the House Subcomm. on Water Resources and Env't of the Comm. on Transp. and Infrastructure*, 107th Cong. 7 (Apr. 10, 2002) (statement of Melissa Samet, Senior Director of Water Resources, American Rivers) (citing Final Project Report and Supplement No. 2 to the Final Environmental Impact Statement, Big Sunflower River Maintenance Project, Vol. I, App. B, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Coordination Act Report (Jul. 1996)).

¹⁹⁵ Ray Mosby & Natalie Perkins, *Yazoo Pump: Whose Homes Here Are Flooding?* DEER CREEK PILOT, Feb. 27, 2003, at 1 ("if, as is currently being advanced, there are 1,000 homes which the pump would protect from virtually annual flooding events, not many of them are apparently located within the lowest of the low area...").

¹⁹⁶ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *Yazoo Backwater Area: Technical Review of the Draft Reformulation Report*, 13-14 (Nov. 2 2000), available at <http://www.epa.gov/region4/water/specialprojects/yazoo/review.htm> (last visited Aug. 21, 2003). See also, *supra* note 50.

¹⁹⁷ Water Resources Development of 1996 § 202(a)(2), 33 U.S.C. § 2213(e)(1). See, *supra* note 151 and accompanying text.

¹⁹⁸ Ray Mosby & Natalie Perkins, *Yazoo Pump: Is It Really a Farm Project?*, DEER CREEK PILOT, Mar. 6, 2003, at 1 ("But it is indeed in the area of increased agricultural production that the Corps concludes the South Delta will achieve its greatest benefits from the pump."). See also, Mosby & Perkins, *supra* note 195; Ray Mosby, *Yazoo Pump: Protecting People or Political Pork?*, DEER CREEK PILOT, Feb. 20, 2003, at 1; Ray Mosby & Natalie Perkins, *Yazoo Pump: Which Names, Numbers Are Correct?*, DEER CREEK PILOT, Mar. 13, 2003, at 1.