

Corps flood control project is criticized

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JEFFERSON CITY - An expert in large river ecosystems testified Monday that thousands of acres of valuable fish habitat will be lost if the Army Corps of Engineers goes forward with an \$85 million Mississippi River flood control project in the Missouri Bootheel.

Richard E. Sparks, a University of Illinois biologist, said that the loss would be dramatic and that a corps plan to offer substitute habitat would not make up for it. Sparks also said fish would not be willing to swim through concrete box culverts that the corps would use in the project. He also said the gates to the culverts would not be open when fish need to move through them in order to spawn.

Sparks, director of research for the Alton-based Great Rivers Research and Education Center, testified on behalf of two environmental groups that are opposing the St. John's Bayou-New Madrid Floodway project. That plan is designed to reduce flooding in New Madrid, Mississippi and Scott counties in southeast Missouri. The project would cut off the last portion of Missouri's flood plain connected to the Mississippi River.



*In the flood plain of the New Madrid and St. John's Bayou Floodway near East Prairie, Mo., a large Pin Oak carries on despite missing a large section of its' crown. The old large trees in the flood plain have trouble once windbreaks are removed for farming.
(Kevin Manning/P-D)*

Environmentalists complain that levee projects have cut off 93 percent of the lower Mississippi River from its flood plain. Allowing the river to flood nearby lowlands provides fish with areas to spawn and rear their young, provides food for migrating waterfowl and helps filter damaging chemicals from the water.

Sparks' testimony came in the opening day of what is expected to be a weeklong hearing before Commissioner June Doughty, a hearing officer for the Missouri Clean Water Commission. Doughty is collecting evidence for the commission to use in deciding whether to grant the corps a clean water permit for the project. Environmental Defense, based in Washington, and the Missouri Coalition for the Environment, based in St. Louis, have challenged a state Department of Natural Resources' recommendation to issue the permit.

In his opening statement, Tim Searchinger, a lawyer for Environmental Defense, said the project would lead to a "huge reduction" in flood plain habitat at a time when federal policy is supposed to be adding to the nation's wetland acreage. He said the New Madrid project alone would eliminate 75,000 acres of wetlands that are flooded every 10 years. That's more than three times the 22,000 acres of lost wetlands the corps approved on its own last year. Searchinger said the project's challengers would prove through testimony of expert scientists and others that:

The corps miscalculated the number of acres needed to make up for the lost fish habitat.

The corps underestimated the value of the wetlands in terms of reducing the amount of nitrogen running off into the Mississippi River and contributing to the biologic "dead zone" in the Gulf of Mexico.

The project's costs are not economically justified in terms of flood protection for the small Mississippi County towns of East Prairie (population 3,400) and Pinhook (population 52). He said the project would raise farmland values by \$12 million, while the project would cost more than six times that amount.

The New Madrid Floodway is a 132,000-acre expanse of lowlands that begin just south of Cairo, Ill., and extend 33 miles down to New Madrid, Mo. With the exception of Pinhook and East Prairie, the land is uninhabited farm ground that provides room for the river to expand in times of high water. The river water gets into the floodway through a 1,500-foot gap in a river levee.

The corps' proposal would close that gap and replace it with a concrete culvert and gates that would be opened only a few weeks each year. To prevent flooding, the gates would be closed and pumps would remove water from the floodway and the nearby St. John Bayou Basin.

The Department of Natural Resources had first rejected the corps clean water permit request. However, after heavy

pressure from elected officials and as a result of negotiations with the corps, the permit was authorized under certain conditions.

William J. Bryan, an assistant state attorney general, defended the department, saying safeguards would allow continued monitoring of the project after permit approval. Bryan said that in the event not enough acres were set aside for new wildlife habitat, the project could be stopped.

Bryan also said the project's plans protect the Big Oak Tree State Park, a 1,000-acre preserve that contains the last remnant of the original swamp forest that once covered the Mississippi Valley down to the Gulf of Mexico. The park needs periodic flooding because it contains tree species that thrive when their roots are wet.

Bryan said the corps' plan includes a canal that would connect the park to the river to provide the trees with the water they need. At the same time, an additional 1,800 acres of farmland around the park would be purchased and forested to provide a buffer zone.

David Sirmans, a lawyer for the Corps of Engineers, said the agency would demonstrate the value of the project with testimony from people who live in the communities that get flooded. Those people, Sirmans said, have to get to school and work by tractors that can carry them over flooded roads.

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