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Bootheel communities gather to celebrate next step in St. John's Project

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Pinhook, Mo., resident Jim Robinson spoke at the Milestone Ceremony. His Congressional testimony helped persuade then-ASA (CW) Les Brownlee of the value of the project.

Some people may say the Norman Rockwell vision of rural America and the values it embodies are a thing of the past. But a group of citizens from southeast Missouri proved the critics wrong Oct. 10.

Gathered next to the Mississippi River levee, more than 350 people listened as a high school band played patriotic music, a Girl Scout and Cub Scout led the Pledge of Allegiance, students from the high school chorus sang the National Anthem and politicians made heartfelt speeches. Why were they all there? They were celebrating their part of the American dream as they took the next step in the hard-fought battle for the St. John's Bayou and New Madrid Floodway Project.

"Good things come to those who wait," said Furg Hunter, the host for the ceremony. "We've been patient, and we've waited."

The project calls for construction of a levee to close a 1,500-foot gap between the main frontline levee and the setback levee of the New Madrid Floodway. Pumping stations and additional channel work planned will reduce headwater flooding in East Prairie, Mo., and other areas in the vicinity.

The list of people seated on the makeshift stage next to the levee read like a who's who for the region: Missouri Lt. Gov. Joe Maxwell, both of Missouri's U.S. senators: Kit Bond and Jim Talent, U.S. Rep. Jo Ann Emerson and Missouri State Sen. Bill Foster. Representing the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was Acting Secretary of the Army Les Brownlee, Mississippi Valley Division Commander Brig. Gen. Don T. Riley and

Memphis District Commander Col. Jack V. Scherer.

Also seated on the stage was Mississippi River Commission member R.D. James of New Madrid, Mo., former Pinhook, Mo., mayor Jim Robinson and his daughter LaToya Robinson-Tate.

In his remarks to the crowd, Col. Scherer focused on the cooperation by all parties required to bring the work to its current point.

"This project is an example of the kinds of fruits of synergy that are very necessary to project success today," he said. "This project has shown the example of that."

Brig. Gen. Riley also spoke of the cooperation demonstrated in bringing the project to this point.



Acting Secretary of the Army Les Brownlee was one of the featured speakers at the ceremony.



U.S. Representative Jo Ann Emerson was one of the happiest people attending the ceremony.

"We have a great partnership of hope – with the Corps, with the St. Johns Levee Board, with the Mississippi Valley Flood Control Association, with Congress, with the citizens of New Madrid, Pinhook, East Prairie, Sikeston – throughout this valley to produce hope for this valley," he said. "Not just economic hope and flood control hope, but environmental hope as well. This project is such a great example of America's partnership of hope."

Riley in turn introduced Acting Secretary of the Army Les Brownlee, who explained his personal involvement in the project.

Brownlee said the congressional testimony of Pinhook, Mo., resident Jim Robinson (whom he heard while serving as the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works), convinced him of the value of the St. John's project.

"I was very impressed and moved by what he said," Brownlee said. "After I learned the details, it was clear to me that this project fit perfectly the guidelines President Bush has given those of us who are fortunate enough to serve in this administration. That is, to support and advance those policies that make peoples' lives better."

One of the last speakers on the agenda was U.S. Representative Jo Ann Emerson. Her late husband, Congressman Bill Emerson, was a key advocate for the project prior to his death in June 1996.

Paraphrasing one of his remarks, she told the crowd, "You have been strong to endure, and resolute to overcome."

She continued by saying, "Thank you for this beginning, a new way of life in our area, a way of life without the constant fear of floods."

She then quoted Pinhook representative Jim Robinson, when he described the simple solution to the problem when he was at the White House and before the Senate committee by saying, "Folks, let's put a little mud in that hole."

The ceremony continued as all principal parties signed the Project Cooperation Agreement Amendment that authorized resumption of the work, and continued with the singing of "God Bless America" by Pinhook resident LaToya Robinson-Tate.



LaToya Robinson-Tate sang "God Bless America" near the end of the ceremony.



Everyone agreed that planting acorns at Big Oak Tree State Park was a great way to end the day of celebration.

The ceremony then moved to nearby Big Oak Tree State Park, where the leaders symbolically planted several state champion burr oak acorns to represent the more than 8,000 acres of mitigation for the project with 1,800 acres targeted in the immediate vicinity of the park. Work planned to mimic historic water level fluctuations will

further enhance the park.

The attendees ended the morning with a catfish luncheon provided by the levee board.

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