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Flood protection work of last 75 years pays huge dividends

MEMPHIS, Tenn., March 15, 2005 – Paul Farris, mayor of Cairo, Ill., said were it not for the flood control system built by the Army Corps of Engineers, last January's high water on the Mississippi River might have had a devastating impact on the citizens of his town.

“We feel very fortunate to have the Army Corps of Engineers assist us in flood control,” he said. “They've been the greatest to work with in flood control, advice and damage assistance.”

But 75 years ago, the situation was much different. Then, the Mississippi was a constantly menacing river, prone to deadly flooding on a regular basis. Yet as a result of work done by the Corps of Engineers – beginning in 1928 following the great flood of 1927 – the Mississippi River is now able to move much more water downstream to the Gulf of Mexico without fear of it spilling over into the fields, highways and homes that border it.

During the 1927 flood, levees along the Mississippi River failed in no less than 13 locations. However, no main stem levee has breached or overtopped on the Lower Mississippi River since then, despite assaults by great floods in 1937, 1950, 1973, 1983 and 1993.

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Flooding/2-2-2

According to Corps of Engineers river forecaster Berland Boyd, the river crested at 50.4 feet in Memphis during the 1937 “super flood.”

As a direct result of the January flooding in 1937, at least 244 people lost their lives. During the first week of the flood, 60,000 refugees poured into Memphis and took up residence at the fairgrounds and in 14 city schools.

When it was all over, nearly 4 million acres in the Corps’ Memphis District had flooded and property damage totaled \$6.2 million (that’s more than \$80 million in 2005 dollars). Workers used 8.5 million sandbags to try and hold back the floodwaters and still nearly 4 million acres of land flooded within the Memphis District boundaries alone.

Boyd said that during the 1993 flood, the river crested at only 33.2 feet in Memphis. In contrast to 1937, no lives were lost as a direct result of the high water. People protected by the main stem levee system stayed safe and dry in their homes and significant flooding only affected a small percentage of land – most of it not actually protected by the flood control system.

“The floods in 1937 and 1993 were comparable in many respects,” Boyd said. “But the river crested much lower (in 1993) because of the channel improvements made by the Corps during the 50 or so years between the two events.”

Still, things could have been much worse. In 1993, the rainfall that occurred in the Missouri and Upper Mississippi basins, if combined with similar rainfall over the Ohio River basin, would have produced water discharges in the lower valley approaching project flood conditions.

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Flooding/3-3-3

According to the Corps of Engineers, a project flood is the greatest flood having a reasonable probability of occurring. This is the standard used when designing flood control works like levees, floodwalls and floodwater pumping stations.

Since 1928, the Corps has invested roughly \$10 billion of taxpayer money to build up the flood control system along the river. The \$10 billion investment has prevented more than \$244 billion (yes, that's BILLION) dollars in flood damages.

Yet when floodwaters do come rampaging down through the lower Mississippi Valley, as they invariably will, the Corps is ready to respond to the emergency.

Patsy Fletcher is the Readiness Branch Chief for the Memphis Corps of Engineers. She is responsible for overseeing all emergency response efforts assigned to her agency.

"We watch the river forecasts very closely and make sure we are ready whenever it looks like we may be looking at a floodfight," Fletcher said. "That's just what happened this last January."

Fletcher explained the Corps combines traditional floodfighting tools and methods with innovative responses to meet the challenges presented by rising Mississippi River levels.

"Our first step when we enter a floodfight is to get people out in the field to monitor our flood control works like levees, flood walls and pumping stations," she said. "We also stand ready to offer technical advice to local authorities like those in the St. Francis Levee District, and to supply them with sandbags, plastic sheeting and portable pumps."

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The Corps' Memphis office routinely keeps 600,000 sandbags and 25,000 square feet of plastic sheeting available for immediate use. These and other supplies are prepositioned at strategic locations around the District for use on short notice.

Although the 2005 flood passed with little affect in the Memphis area, the Corps continues to keep a close eye on the river.

"We never take our delicate relationship with the Mississippi River for granted," said Col. Charlie Smithers, commander of the Corps' Memphis District. "It can rise quickly and if we are not continually vigilant, it can inflict great damage.

"Protecting the lives and livelihoods of the citizens of the Lower Mississippi Valley is our most important mission," he said. "And we intend to continue doing just that."