

State official testifies on levee project

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JEFFERSON CITY - A state official said Tuesday that he approved a clean water permit for the Army Corps of Engineers' New Madrid Floodway project because the corps pledged to make up for loss of habitat.

Scott Totten, head of the Department of Natural Resources' clean water program, said state officials based their decision on information from the corps. He said that because of concerns raised about the loss of fish and wildlife habitat, the corps will be required to monitor the impact of the project for five years and fix any problems.

Environmental groups say the corps miscalculated the amount of wetlands it needed to buy to make up for the project's environmental damage. Totten agreed with a lawyer for one of the environmental groups who said the ecosystem would be impaired if the corps underestimated the land needed to make up for habitat losses.

Totten's testimony came as hearings resumed before a Clean Water Commission hearing officer who is reviewing the state's issuance of the permit. The corps wants to spend \$85 million to close a 1,500-foot gap in a Mississippi River levee in the Bootheel. The gap allows water to enter the floodway, which is said to be the last connection between the river and its flood plain in the lower Mississippi valley.

Environmental groups have challenged issuance of the permit, saying the project is a waste of money that will not solve flooding problems but will eliminate wetlands that support fish, waterfowl and water filtration.

Supporters say closing the floodway will protect farmland and the communities of East Prairie and Pinhook, Mo., from frequent flooding. To make up for the loss of wetlands, the corps would purchase and then reforest 8,375 acres of farmland.