

Floodway project good for area

By Col. Jack V. Scherer

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I would like to respond to Alan Journet's Oct. 28 guest column, "Floodway raises concerns," regarding the Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway.

Journet states that the project threatens the few forested wetland acres remaining along with the wildlife habitat and species they support. Forested wetlands are only sparsely distributed in the lower floodway, and these are primarily in public ownership.

Analysis shows that most wetland functions of these forested areas will not be adversely impacted after the project is constructed. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' mitigation plan will more than double the amount of forested wetlands in the project area, creating over 8,000 acres of bottomland hardwoods. Analysis performed by an interagency team indicates that all wildlife resources will be more than adequately compensated by this aggressive mitigation plan.

The closure of the floodway gap will affect river fish access to the floodway, but to say that this will threaten many species is a gross misstatement. The floodplain affected by the levee closure represents only a small fraction of floodplain habitat available to fish in the vicinity of New Madrid. Primary species impacted are those common to the Mississippi River basin, primarily gar, shad, sunfish and buffalo -- species for which abundant spawning and rearing habitat are available throughout the natural river floodplain.

To further address agency concerns, the floodway project has been modified to allow for increased connectivity between the river and the floodway during the spring spawning season. Additionally, habitat in the floodway and general project area will be improved because of the reforestation or improvements on over 9,000 acres.

Journet states that benefits to East Prairie will be doubtful. But the well-being of East Prairie is based not only on urban flood protection, but also the reduction in flood damages to the surrounding area. The economy of the adjacent agricultural community has a direct impact on the well being of East Prairie, whose needs extend far beyond an inadequate storm drain system. Even if the city's storm-drain system is improved, there is not an adequate outlet. The project provides the needed outlet improvements.

Further, many of the city's residents depend directly on agriculture for their livelihoods. Improved storm-drain systems inside the city will do nothing to prevent frequent flooding of the surrounding agricultural fields and its corresponding economic hardship on the area's residents.

Journet states that raising the community of Pinhook's roads by a "few inches" would solve its problems. The truth is that roads would have to be raised several feet, but this would still not solve Pinhook's primary problem. Homes would still be flooded and livelihood compromised as agricultural fields are frequently flooded by backwater from the Mississippi River.

The Memphis District has recently started detailed work related to land acquisition for mitigation. Contrary to Journet's assertion, many landowners have attended information meetings on this part of the project and have expressed interest in selling their land for reforestation. A condition of the water quality certification and of the Record of Decision on the Environmental Impact Statement requires that the corps acquire all mitigation land prior to completing the closure of the levee gap and operation of the project.

Journet talks about this project causing flooding problems in neighboring states. The corps' extensive hydrological analysis indicates the project will have virtually no measurable impact in river elevations. Also, the Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway does not depend on the 1,500-foot levee gap for successful operation.

The project area will be better off economically and environmentally with implementation of this project.

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