

## **Hearing underway on New Madrid Floodway project**

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The Missouri Clean Water Commission is holding a hearing this week about the New Madrid Floodway project — an issue where some environmentalists and some Bootheel residents don't always see eye-to-eye.

The \$85 million Army Corps of Engineers plan is designed to reduce flooding in New Madrid, Mississippi and Scott counties.

Supporters in southeast Missouri have said they believe the project will protect against floods and could help the area's economy. Opponents say the plan will cut off the last portion of Missouri's flood plain connected to the Mississippi River, and prove harmful to fish, trees and the environment.

Plans for the St. John's Bayou-New Madrid Floodway Project include closing a 1,500-foot gap in existing levees, as well as adding new gates and pumping stations.

Richard E. Sparks, director of research for the Alton-based Great Rivers Research and Education Center, testified on behalf of two environmental groups opposing the project Monday, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported.

Washington-based Environmental Defense and the Missouri Coalition for the Environment have challenged a state Department of Natural Resources' recommendation to issue the clean water permit.

The testimony is being given before Commissioner June Doughty, a hearing officer for the Missouri Clean Water Commission. The commission will decide whether to grant the corps the permit.

The environmental groups argue the corps miscalculated the number of acres needed to make up for the lost fish habitat; underestimated the wetlands value for reducing the amount of nitrogen running into the Mississippi River and contributing to environmental damage in the Gulf of Mexico; and that the costs aren't justified to protect the Mississippi County towns of East Prairie \_population 3,400\_ and Pinhook, population 52.

The New Madrid Floodway is made up of 132,000 acres of lowlands extending from south of Cairo, Ill., for 33 miles to New Madrid, Mo. Much of the land 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' wants to replace the gap 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. But following pressure from some elected officials and negotiations with the corps, the permit was authorized under certain conditions.

William J. Bryan, an assistant state attorney general, defended the department; he said the project will still be monitored following permit approval. He said the plan protects the Big Oak Tree State Park, a 1,000-acre preserve with 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 certain types of trees there thrive when their roots are wet. Bryan said the corps' plan has a canal to connect the park to the river to provide that water.

A lawyer for the Corps of Engineers, David Sirmans, said testimony is planned from residents who live in the communities that flood.

On Oct. 10, more than 200 residents and some politicians celebrated plans in New Madrid to move forward with the project. Talk among them at the time was that the environmental concerns had been resolved.