

Testimony backs corps plan for Bootheel

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JEFFERSON CITY - A community leader from East Prairie, Mo., testified Friday that an Army Corps of Engineers project would free her town from the devastating economic and social consequences of repeat flooding.

Martha Ellen Black, who runs a family center in the Bootheel town, said water backs through a 1,500-foot gap in a Mississippi River levee and into East Prairie every few years. She described conditions in the town when it floods as "third-world," and said the water closes roads, the school and businesses.

It also damages buildings and hampers police, she said.

An \$85 million corps plan would plug the gap in the levee, greatly reducing the flooding of 75,000 acres of mostly farmland in southern Missouri.

Black testified on the final day of hearings before a Clean Water Commission officer who is reviewing the state's issuance of a permit approving the project.

In challenging the permit, environmental groups say the project will eliminate wetlands that support fish, waterfowl and provide water filtration.

They say the project won't meet its stated goal of protecting East Prairie from flooding. More effective and cheaper, they say, is adding drainage and constructing a partial levee around the town - an alternative already dismissed by the corps.

Black has been involved with the [JU] project since the early 1990s when she helped petition the federal government for millions of dollars in funding.

She said the town's petition cited backwater flooding from the Mississippi as the single biggest obstacle to economic stability.

In other testimony, Steven Ashby, a water quality expert hired by the corps, said 8,375 acres of reforested cropland will more than make up for wetlands lost when the gap is plugged.

He said that even though less acreage will be flooded, the reforested land will better filter nitrogen from agricultural runoff. He said much of what is currently flooded is cropland, which doesn't remove much - if any - nitrogen.

The environmental groups said Ashby was greatly miscalculating the value of existing flooded acreage.

Nitrogen runoff from agricultural land is blamed for a huge "dead zone" in the Gulf of Mexico at the mouth of the Mississippi River.

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