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Let it flood? Or put in plug?

Opinions split on gap for New Madrid Floodway

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NEW MADRID, Mo. - No sooner had farmers planted their crops last spring than a prolonged spate of rainy weather across the Midwest sent floodwaters lapping against levees up and down the Mississippi River.

But not here.

In the New Madrid Floodway, a 1,500-foot gap in the levee allowed the Mississippi to wash across tens of thousands of acres like a great seasonal tide. The flood replenished wetlands while providing new feeding and nursery areas for fish, waterfowl and shorebirds.

To farmers and residents of local communities, however, this not-uncommon event was hardly anything to cheer about. It drowned some 48,000 acres of crops and left communities isolated and homes threatened.

The water has long since retreated, but a proposed $85 million Corps of Engineers project to deal with the flooding remains a matter of intense political and regulatory conflict in this area of the Missouri Bootheel 120 miles north of Memphis.

Missouri officials, citing a host of environmental concerns, have blocked a Clean Water Act permit needed by the corps to build the St. Johns River Basin-New Madrid Floodway project.

That November decision, while delighting environmentalists, infuriated area residents and Missouri congressional leaders. And it set off high-stakes negotiating between state regulators and corps officials, most of them based in Memphis.

"There's been quite a bit of discussion. . . . Both sides are talking," said Michael Warrick, deputy director of the water protection/soil conservation division of the Missouri Department of Natural Resources.

With the talks, officials hope to reach an agreement resolving the permit dispute prior to a scheduled June hearing on the appeal by the corps of the state decision.

The project at the center of the turmoil would replumb the drainage of an area covering more than 600 square miles.

In the New Madrid Floodway - so named because federal officials would purposely inundate it during a disastrous flood on the Mississippi - water backs up from the river through the gap in the levee. In the adjoining St. Johns Basin, floodwaters often get trapped inside levees.

The project would plug the gap in the levee and include pumping stations and stream-channel alterations to improve drainage.

Larry Sharpe, the corps project manager, said the initiative is "critical" to impoverished towns such as East Prairie, Mo., and the community of Pinhook.

It would alleviate the frequent flooding that prevents development and erodes the agricultural base of the local economy, he said.

Although it was first authorized by the Flood Control Act of 1954, the St. Johns-New Madrid initiative has attracted increasing controversy in recent years. Environmental groups have cited it as an example of wasteful and environmentally destructive corps projects.

The chief objections center on corps plans to close the 1,500-foot gap, which provides a rare outlet for a river that has lost 95

percent of its historic floodplain.

When this low-lying area floods, newly spawned white bass can feed on plankton and find refuge from bigger fish. Shorebirds feed in the vast, open shallows and watch out for predators. Long after floods recede, pools abounding in wildlife dot the landscape.

The project would dry up, harm or otherwise alter as many as 18,000 acres of wetlands. The corps would mitigate that damage by reforesting more than 8,000 acres of low-lying cropland.

Sharpe said the project has been revised to allow for some continued flow from the Mississippi back into the floodway.

But environmentalists, government scientists and other critics of the project say that plugging the gap in the levee would harm fisheries, degrade water quality and diminish wildlife habitat.

"Once that connectivity is lost by closing the gap, the fish that need that floodplain when it's flooded won't have that anymore. And it's a critical habitat," said Charles Scott, a Missouri-based field supervisor of ecological services for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Ted Heisel, law and policy coordinator for the Missouri Coalition for the Environment, calls the floodway area "one of the most special places left on the Middle Mississippi River."

Environmentalists also dismiss claims that the project is designed to benefit poor communities. They say it's more of a handout to large farming operations that grow overabundant and heavily subsidized crops.

"Basically, the project is a fraud," said Ted Searchinger, an attorney with the group Environmental Defense in Washington.

In a letter denying the permit approval, the state Department of Natural Resources cited concerns about how the corps planned to mitigate the loss of wetlands and the possible impacts to a state park in the area.

Reaction to the state decision was swift.

U.S. Rep. Jo Ann Emerson (R-Mo.) accused regulators of putting "the politics of the environmental elitists ahead of the personal safety and prosperity of those who live and work along the river."

In letters to the corps, residents also expressed exasperation over the flooding problem.

"I don't believe the environmental nuts who oppose this should be allowed to affect a decision that could benefit so many people," wrote Joe Jackson, a resident of a subdivision that frequently floods.

Among the most vocal of project proponents is Jim Robinson, a resident of Pinhook. He said his community, one of the only places where black sharecroppers could buy farmland decades ago, needs help from the backwater flooding.

"I believe if they just put some mud in that hole (the levee gap), this will be as nice a place to live as . . . anywhere in the world," Robinson said.

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