

Columnists

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Why the Army Corps Should Drop the New Madrid Levee

By Tyrone Coleman 6 hrs ago



Tuesday May 3, 2011--Water rises around a farm in the Birds Point-New Madrid floodway after the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers created a breach in the levee with explosives on Monday night. Officials hope breaching the levee would allow water to fill the floodway to relieve pressure and lower the flood levels upstream at Cairo, Ill., and other communities. By Tuesday morning, the river was at 60.62 feet in Cairo and was expected to keep falling to 59.4 feet by Saturday. David Carson dcarson@post-dispatch.com

Despite the recent floods that caused devastation up and down the Mississippi, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is finalizing plans for a \$165 million levee project that will put river communities at even greater risk of catastrophic flooding.

My home, Cairo, Ill., is nestled in the confluence of two of America's greatest rivers: the Mississippi and the Ohio. Our historic community was born out of the shipping these rivers brought to our doorstep. But living close to two unpredictable rivers comes with a certain amount of risk.

Normally, we view the Army Corps as our ally in efforts to protect us from flooding. This is why we are baffled by the Corps' insistence on pursuing the expensive and unnecessary New Madrid levee. The agency appears to be working to help us with one hand and destroy us with the other.

Unlike most levees, the New Madrid levee would block an area that was designated as a floodway in the aftermath of the 1927 flood. During severe flooding, the Army Corps diverts water from the rising Mississippi River into this section of the river's historic flood plain.

But using this floodway has always been met with opposition. During the flood of 2011, a lawsuit delayed activation of this floodway, putting the community of Olive Branch under water and destroying many homes within the town. If the order to use the floodway had come much later, it might have been too late for Cairo, as well.

The landowners in the floodway want the levee so they can more intensely develop their land. But more development in the floodway will also make it that much more politically challenging to flood the area when necessary. And scientists are telling us that the Mississippi will flood more frequently in a warming world.

We will never be able to fully control the Mighty Mississippi, but timely activation of the floodway will let us avoid disaster by sending water into an area that has been designated for flooding for 80 years – instead of letting it inundate historic Cairo and other river communities.

If built, the levee would also damage the health of the Mississippi River and its wildlife. The levee would effectively drain an area of wetlands 2½ times the size of Manhattan. These flood plain wetlands are some of the last remaining fish spawning grounds along a long stretch of the Mississippi. Without these wetlands, fish populations are projected to crash in a large stretch of the river.

This is why The Washington Post, in a 2013 editorial, called the levee proposal a “bizarre waste of taxpayer money and an ecological disaster” and why the Missouri Department of Conservation has flatly informed the Army Corps that the project “should not be constructed.” Internal Army Corps’ emails reveal that the project is an “economic dud” with “huge environmental consequences.”

A multitude of organizations — from the local chapter of the NAACP to the National Wildlife Federation—have called on President Barack Obama’s administration to stop the project once and for all.

The Army Corps should abandon its efforts to build the New Madrid levee. If the Corps cannot see reason, the Environmental Protection Agency should stop the project using its veto power under the Clean Water Act. The EPA only uses this veto power in the most egregious circumstances — the New Madrid levee easily qualifies.

In short, this project would put people’s lives at risk, destroy a vast area of wetlands and damage the health of the Mississippi River. It is an irresponsible use of taxpayer dollars and should not be allowed to move forward.

Tyrone Coleman is mayor of Cairo, Ill.