

January 19, 2018

The Honorable Thad Cochran
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
S-128, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Rodney P. Frelinghuysen
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives
H-305, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Vice Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
S-146A, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nita M. Lowey
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington D.C. 20515

Re: Oppose Efforts to Resurrect the Yazoo Backwater Pumps

Dear Senator Cochran, Senator Leahy, Representative Frelinghuysen, and Representative Lowey:

On behalf of our millions of members and supporters, the undersigned 87 conservation and faith-based organizations urge you to oppose efforts to resurrect the Yazoo Backwater Pumping Plant Project in Mississippi. This \$220 million Army Corps of Engineers project will drain and damage 200,000 acres of ecologically rich wetlands in the Mississippi Delta—an area larger than all 5 boroughs of New York City.

The destruction of nationally significant wetlands at this scale is indefensible and unheard of since passage of the Clean Water Act. Yet, section 433 of the Senate Appropriations Committee draft FY18 Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill directs the Corps of Engineers to “immediately” initiate construction of the Yazoo Pumps, throwing out the long-standing legal prohibition against constructing this project issued by the George W. Bush Administration and prohibiting any and all additional environmental review.

The George W. Bush Administration put a permanent stop to the Yazoo Pumps in 2008, when it vetoed the project under the Clean Water Act. This veto was strongly supported by more than 115 conservation organizations from across the country, 540 independent scientists, and 99.9 percent of the almost 48,000 comments submitted by members of the public, including 90 percent of comments submitted by residents of Mississippi. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service strongly supported the veto to prevent devastation of the region’s vital wildlife habitat.

The veto was based on a comprehensive review which found that the Yazoo Pumps would cause “unacceptable damage” to “some of the richest wetland and aquatic resources in the nation.” The wetlands that would be drained provide hemispherically important foraging grounds and some of the richest stopover habitat in the country for migratory birds and waterfowl that live out much of their lives far beyond the borders of Mississippi. Wetlands that would be drained also sustain a highly productive floodplain fishery and an extremely important but increasingly rare bottomland hardwood forest ecosystem.

The Yazoo Pumps would also lay waste to extensive federal investments by draining wetlands that the federal taxpayers have long been paying to protect. Wetlands will be drained on tens of thousands of acres of National Forest and National Wildlife Refuge lands, on lands enrolled in the Wetlands Reserve and Conservation Reserve Programs, and on lands purchased and restored as mitigation for previously constructed federal water projects.

These nationally significant wetland resources and investments would be destroyed so that a small number of large landowners can intensify agricultural production on lands that regularly flood. These large landowners would be the only people to benefit from the Yazoo Pumps. Many of these landowners already receive substantial federal farm subsidy payments. In just the two-year floodplain in the project area, 51 landowners received a total of \$15.3 million in farm subsidy payments between 1996 and 2001.

The extent of the environmental devastation and taxpayer waste caused Senator John McCain to call the Yazoo Pumps “one of the worst projects ever conceived by Congress.” We agree, and we urge you to reject any and all efforts to resurrect this utterly unacceptable project.

Sincerely,

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Riverkeeper
Altamaha Riverkeeper

Ellen McNulty
Executive Director
Arkansas Wildlife Federation

Rachel Conn
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