



Illinois Department of Natural Resources

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Bruce Rauner, Governor
Wayne A. Rosenthal, Director

November 16, 2015

Major General Michael C. Wehr
Commander, USACE, Mississippi Valley Division
1400 Walnut Street
Vicksburg, MS 39180

Dear Commander Wehr:

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources understands that the Corps of Engineers' will soon release a final Environmental Impact Statement recommending construction of the St. Johns Bayou and New Madrid Floodway Project that includes closing off the 1500 foot wide outlet gap in the floodway levee system. I write to express the Department's serious concerns with the New Madrid Floodway project. These concerns also reflect concerns shared with this agency by the City of Cairo, Alexander County, and several Drainage Districts in Southern Illinois.

Closure of the New Madrid floodway outlet gap in the levee will promote intensified use of the New Madrid Floodway, which will increase the opposition and obstacles to activating the floodway to save Illinois towns and farms during the next big flood. The state of Missouri and its residents have a long history of opposing activation of the floodway operation plan. During the Mississippi and Ohio River flooding in 2011, the state of Missouri objected vehemently in federal court to the operation of the floodway project under any circumstances, even when over 60,000 acres of the New Madrid floodway in Missouri were already under water near the outlet of the floodway. If all of those 60,000 acres remain dry as a result of the project proposed, we believe the objections raised to the required operation of the New Madrid Floodway will be even stronger. David Willis, Chairman of the Len Small Levee and Drainage District, Olive Branch, Illinois has said: "We could have saved an entire community and avoided millions of dollars in flood damages if the New Madrid floodway had been used earlier during the 2011 flood. We simply can't afford to make it even harder to use the floodway in the future."

Even small delays in activating the floodway for any reason can have disastrous results in Illinois. Delays caused by Missouri's opposition to activating the floodway in 2011 resulted in the evacuation of Cairo, Illinois and millions of dollars in flood damages to

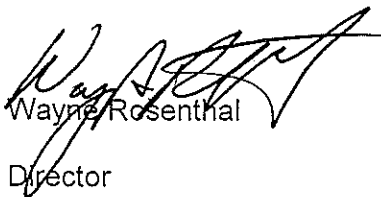
Olive Branch and Metropolis, Illinois and neighboring areas. The Birds Point – New Madrid Floodway Operations Plan, page B-1 notes that at a river gage reading of approximately 59 feet, preparations will be made to open the floodway to the Mississippi upon orders of the President, Mississippi River Commission (MRC). The Plan further states that at approximately 60 feet, and upon orders of the President, MRC, the floodway plan will be activated as required by hydrologic conditions. However, technical debates and legal delays resulted in a record river gage reading of 61.72 feet, and associated destructive flooding in Illinois before the floodway was activated. After the floodway was finally activated in 2011, water levels at Cairo dropped 2.7 feet in just 48 hours.

It is important to note that the US Army Corps of Engineers is authorized, but not mandated, to activate the floodway's operation plan. Accordingly, decisions must be made to activate the floodway, decisions that can be fraught with delays and that are influenced by economic factors. The cost of the St. Johns Bayou and New Madrid Floodway Project is estimated at \$165 million dollars. Such a high cost required to close the gap in the outlet of the New Madrid Floodway further hinders the desire of the US Army Corps of Engineers to remove such costly works to activate the floodway's operation plan, only to have to pay to restore the closure created by this project at similar or much greater taxpayer expense. Given the observed impacts of climate change in the Midwest, it seems reasonable that the need to activate the floodway in the future will be much more frequent, and therefore, much more costly if the proposed project is constructed.

The Department also requests that the potential environmental consequences of the levee gap closure of the St. Johns Bayou and New Madrid Floodway Project be fully evaluated. The connection between the Mississippi river and the extensive New Madrid Floodway backwater habitat provides important spawning, rearing, and foraging habitat for fish and wildlife populations. The loss of such a unique habitat on the middle Mississippi River could have adverse environmental implications for fish and wildlife populations in the region.

Please consider the detriments to the state of Illinois noted in the concerns expressed in this letter and keep paramount the safety and wellbeing of Illinois citizens in your agency's role of assuring compliance with the provisions of the Clean Water Act.

Sincerely,


Wayne Rosenthal
Director