



Reject Efforts to Resurrect the Yazoo Pumps

One of the Most Wasteful and Damaging Water Projects in History

The Environmental Protection Agency is reviewing its Clean Water Act veto of the environmentally devastating Yazoo Pumps. Issued in 2008 by the George W. Bush Administration, this veto is protecting 200,000 acres of ecologically rich waterfowl habitat in the Mississippi Delta and saving more than \$400 million federal taxpayer dollars.¹ Though touted as a flood control project, the Yazoo Pumps are not designed to protect communities from floods—instead, they would drain wetlands so large landowners can increase agricultural production on marginal lands that have always flooded.

- **Massive Wetland Destruction:** The Yazoo Pumps would drain and damage up to 200,000 acres of ecologically rich wetlands in the Mississippi Delta—an area larger than all 5 boroughs of New York City.² Wetlands would be drained on tens of thousands of acres of National Forest lands, National Wildlife Refuge lands, Wetlands Reserve and Conservation Reserve Program lands, and mitigation lands for previously constructed federal water projects. The George W. Bush Administration used the Clean Water Act to veto the project in 2008 after determining that the Yazoo Pumps would cause “unacceptable damage” to “some of the richest wetland and aquatic resources in the nation.”
- **Overwhelming, Bi-Partisan Opposition to the Pumps:** Senator John McCain called the Yazoo Pumps “one of the worst projects ever conceived by Congress.” The 2008 EPA veto had overwhelming support from: 120 conservation organizations; 540 independent scientists; the Society of Wetland Scientists; the Association of State Floodplain Managers; a former EPA Administrator; four former EPA Assistant Administrators for Water; a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works; and 99.9% of the 48,000 comments submitted during the veto process, **including 90% of comments submitted by Mississippi residents.** The Department of the Interior and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service strongly opposed the Pumps. Mississippi’s largest newspaper, the *Clarion Ledger*, opposed the project in five separate editorials and the *New York Times* opposed the project in six editorials. Efforts to resurrect the Pumps through a legislative rider in 2018 were also overwhelmingly opposed.
- **A Bad Investment for the Nation:** The entire financial burden of the Yazoo Pumps—more than \$400 million to construct plus more than \$2 million each year to operate—rests on federal taxpayers as there is no local cost share for the project. An independent economic analysis showed that the Pumps could not be economically justified even at the 2008 price tag of \$220 million; the project would produce less than 14 cents of agricultural benefits for each dollar spent and do little more than “help landowners grow crops on land that is farmed only to earn farm subsidy payments.” The Yazoo Pumps would lay waste to extensive federal investments by draining tens of thousands of acres of wetlands on National Wildlife Refuge lands, National Forest lands, Wetlands Reserve and Conservation Reserve Program lands, and on mitigation lands for other federal water resources projects.
- **Special Interest Giveaway:** The Yazoo Pumps are designed to drain wetlands so large landowners can increase agricultural production on marginal lands that have always flooded. More than 80% of the projected project benefits come from agriculture. Fewer than 100 farms, averaging 1,000 acres each, could benefit from the project, and many of the landowners already receive substantial farm subsidy payments. In just the 2-year floodplain of the project area, 51 landowners split \$15.3 million in federal

For more information, please contact the National Wildlife Federation
Melissa Samet, Senior Water Resources Counsel, 415-762-8264, sametm@nwf.org

farm subsidies in the six years from 1996 through 2001. One landowner received \$2.7 million and four others each received more than \$1 million.

- **Hurts Communities in Mississippi:** Though touted as a flood control project, the Yazoo Pumps are not designed to save homes and lives. By destroying 200,000 acres of wetlands, the Pumps will eliminate 200 billion gallons of flood water storage capacity—natural flood protection that will be lost forever. Local communities will also suffer from the project-induced reductions in water quality, lost wildlife habitat, and increased pesticide use in an area already plagued by toxic contamination. Downstream communities may also be put at risk as the project will pump 9 billion gallons of water a day into the Yazoo and Mississippi Rivers when they are at flood stage. Residential flooding in the project area is very limited as a result of other major Corps projects, with only 62 properties filing National Flood Insurance claims over the 24 year period from 1979 to 2002.³
- **Common Sense Measures Can Be Implemented Quickly to Help Communities and Farmers:** Existing federal programs could be deployed immediately to address the limited flooding in the project area. Elevating homes and roads, voluntary buy-outs and relocations, and increased enrollment in the Wetlands Reserve Program would quickly provide cost-effective protections for homes, properties, and businesses. The Wetlands Reserve Program, which is highly popular in the Yazoo Pumps project area, provides a win-win for farmers, communities, and wildlife by compensating farmers who volunteer to take their land out of production and restore it back to wetlands that provide natural flood protection along with a host of other benefits. The Environmental Protection Agency outlined a \$20 million initiative for the Lower Yazoo River Basin that relied on these common sense measure, a fraction of the cost of the astronomically expensive Yazoo Pumps.
- **Downstream Impacts Not Studied.** The Corps has acknowledged that flood stages would rise by a quarter of a foot in the Yazoo River after the Pumps are turned on. But the Corps has not properly examined the impacts to nearby levees or downstream communities from forcing 9 billion gallons of water a day into an already swollen Yazoo River for 31 days—the average time the Pumps will be turned on, or for 60 days—the amount of time the Pumps would have been running during the 2019 flood. The Corps has a history of flawed planning leading to major flooding, with the levee and floodwall failures in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina being a tragically notable example.

Endnotes

¹ The Corps' 2007 Final Environmental Impact Statement estimated construction costs at more than \$220 million based on 2005 price levels. Updating these costs using the Corps' Civil Works Construction Cost Index and current mitigation costs puts the cost of construction plus compensatory mitigation at more than \$300.6 million based on 2018 price levels. The additional promised reforestation efforts brings the total project construction costs to \$438.5 million. Operations and maintenance costs are additional \$2.1+ million each year.

² The George W. Bush Administration vetoed the project based on the 67,000 acres of wetland impacts acknowledged by the Corps. However the Corps also admitted that they did not evaluate the full range of wetland impacts. EPA and independent hydrologists determined that the project would impact 200,000 acres of wetlands.

³ Collectively, these repetitive loss properties filed 209 claims for damages totaling \$1.664 million.