



# MISSISSIPPI RIVER NETWORK

Protecting the Land, Water and People of America's Greatest River Basin

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## **Flood Prevention Must Include Giving Rivers Room to Swell**

On May 2, 2011, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers blew up a levee on the Mississippi River to prevent serious flooding damage downriver in Cairo, Illinois. Maj. Gen. Michael J. Walsh, commander of the Mississippi Valley Division of the Corps, ordered the blast of the Birds Point levee along the first of several sections of the earthen barrier, sending 550,000 cubic feet of water a second across the 130,000 acres of farmland known as the Birds Point – New Madrid Floodway.

This floodway is one of four floodways designed into the Mississippi River flood control system in order to lower flood stages during major flood events. The decision to utilize the floodway this year was not without controversy. There are 90 homes in the floodway. In addition, farmers whose livelihoods depend on the fertile land of the floodway have lost spring plantings.

Blasting the levee put people and livelihoods in harm's way in order to, hopefully, spare more people and livelihoods down river. The Mississippi River Network, a coalition of 37 organizations dedicated to protecting the land, water and people of the Mississippi River basin, advocates better management alternatives that include improved water storage through restoration of wetlands and floodplains upstream.

“Our hearts go out to all those affected by these floods,” said Jennifer Browning, manager of the Mississippi River Network. “Whether they are flooded because of the blown levee or because of the sheer volume of water headed downriver, the devastation is heartbreaking.”

In the 1980s, when the floodway plan was under review, officials estimated that activating the floodway would cost residents and the county \$300 million. Today, losses probably could come close \$1 billion in

this one floodway alone. General Walsh has indicated that additional levees may have to be breached if this first blast doesn't ease enough pressure on critical downriver flood protection barriers.

“Most of the nation’s efforts to date have focused on gray infrastructure - levees, dams, floodwalls, and agricultural drainage tiles - to control floods” said Shana Udvardy, Director of Flood Management Policy at American Rivers. “These piecemeal decisions cause rivers to rise higher and faster, impacting downstream communities and the entire river basin. Because levees in Iowa, Illinois and Missouri contribute to flooding in Mississippi and Louisiana, we must make river-related decisions with the health of the whole basin in mind.”

The floods of 2011 will be remembered by both the victims and government officials for generations. But, they will not be the last floods to devastate the area or challenge how we manage, protect and restore the river. The Mississippi River Network urges federal and local governments to give top priority to non-structural, natural approaches to reduce flooding from storms. The Network calls for a national, strategic approach to protecting and restoring the entire basin. As the Administration is currently revising the federal water resources planning principles and guidelines, we call on the Administration to seize this opportunity to adopt a selection process that protects public health and safety and restores environmental resources. To do this, we must abandon the current reliance on benefit-cost analysis as the fundamental driver for federal water resources planning. We must also require the use of less environmentally damaging alternatives, including nonstructural, water efficiency and restoration approaches.

“After Iowans suffered two 500 year floods in the past 18 years, it is clear that focusing flood protection on stronger levees and flood walls is not enough,” said Susan Heathcote, Water Program Director at Iowa Environmental Council. “Long term development planning along rivers must include moving people and structures out of harm’s way and allowing wetland and floodplain areas to perform their natural function—to absorb and slow the river’s flow during spring floods.”

The spring floods of 2011 are surpassing the great floods of 1927 in many record books. The 1927 flood damage resulted in the first comprehensive flood control plan in the United States. This plan included the building of levees up and down the River to control floodwaters—levees like the one at Birds Point. The engineered system protects a 35,000-square-mile stretch of land from Cairo in the north to the Louisiana delta.

“The flood of 1927 was the result of eight months of sustained high waters, but the flood of 2011 has reared and appeared in the space of a month,” said John Ruskey, owner of Quapaw Canoe Company in Clarksdale, Mississippi. “What’s the difference between 1927 and 2011? With the loss of wetlands and river floodplains, there is less space for the water to flow in the greater Mississippi Valley.”

Wetlands filter pollutants, absorb excess rainwater and reduce flooding by acting as a giant sponge. Flooding in 1993 caused an estimated \$16 billion in damages. Scientists estimate that returning some lands in the Upper Mississippi River basin to their original form—wetlands—would significantly reduce future flooding.

“After the devastating floods of 1927, Americans demanded that the federal government take action. This action resulted in the engineered system that we have today,” said Matt Rota, Director of Science and Water Policy at the Gulf Restoration Network. “It’s time for our leaders to reexamine that system. By incorporating wetlands and using floodplains the way they were intended, we can better protect American lives, livelihoods and resources.”

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The **Mississippi River Network: Headwaters to the Gulf** is a coalition of 37 organizations dedicated to protecting the land, water and people of the Mississippi River basin. It is managed by Biodiversity Project and supported by McKnight Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation. For more information on the Network, visit: [www.1mississippi.net](http://www.1mississippi.net).