

SUMMARY OF ISSUES

Mississippi River Commission
Public Meetings held on the MV Mississippi, 4-8 Mar 2002

More than 340 members of the public participated. The Mississippi River Commission (MRC) members and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers staff along with public interests, experienced firsthand the issues, concerns, and challenges facing the citizens and organizations in relation to water resources in their respective regions.

The members of the public and organizations openly expressed their satisfaction with the opportunity and the forum to address and be heard by the MRC. A letter of response was sent to each individual who addressed the MRC to discuss all questions and issues raised by that individual.

Detailed answers to each person that made a presentation and or filed for the record are available at www.mvd.usace.army.mil. The address of various issues that the public presented is listed below.

STATE SPECIFIC ISSUES

Grand Prairie Area Demonstration Project (AR)

As water levels continue to rapidly drop in both the Sparta and Alluvial Aquifers, people are becoming more aware of the severe water problems in the Grand Prairie area. These problems are becoming evident in other areas of the country that have traditionally had abundant water.

The Grand Prairie Area Demonstration project was developed to supply water to sustain irrigated agriculture and sustain the aquifers into the future without harming the environment. The Corps is currently working to construct the on-farm features of the project with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Arkansas Soil and Water Conservation Commission, the White River Regional Irrigation Water Distribution District, and local citizens.

The President's budget request for Fiscal Year 2003 does not include funding to continue and/or complete this effort. The budget request for the Mississippi River and Tributaries project focuses on its main stem components and studies and projects whose outputs are related to flood control, navigation, and environmental restoration.

Yazoo Backwater Reformulation Project (MS)

The Vicksburg District has worked with the Mississippi Levee Board and South Delta Flood Control Committee in several consensus-building sessions to help formulate the

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best plan for the Yazoo Backwater area. The District has selected a combination plan that includes a 14,000 cubic feet per second pump which will initiate pumping at elevation 87 feet, National Geodetic Vertical Datum, and a non-structural flood damage reduction component that includes purchase of 62,500 acres of conservation easements from willing sellers. This plan results in a net increase to the wetland, aquatic, and terrestrial resources in the area. However, the Environmental Protection Agency and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service still oppose the project along with many national environmental groups as we heard in the public meeting.

Big Sunflower River Maintenance Project (MS)

The Corps is continuing with design and real estate activities for Items 1 and 2 for the Big Sunflower River maintenance project. Plans are essentially complete for Item 4. Maintenance contracts will be awarded when environmental documentation is complete, pending availability of funds and water quality certification.

REGIONAL ISSUES

Environmental Management Program (EMP) and the Lower Mississippi River Resources Assessment (LMRRA)

Both studies have significant potential for beneficial ecosystem management. The Commission agrees that the level of effort and commitment to the environmental aspects of these two projects are very important, particularly in light of the newly released Environmental Operating Principles (EOPs) used to guide the Corps in all of its work.

The Corps' commitment to the environment is strong; however, the funding levels for these projects are limited, with many interests competing for the Federal dollar. The EMP on the upper Mississippi River has not been funded to the authorized levels since its inception. The LMRRA project, while authorized in the Water Resources Development Act of 2000, is not yet funded. We have received letters of intent from all states involved to share costs on the LMRRA when a Federal interest is identified.

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Upper Mississippi and Illinois Waterway System Navigation Study

Many presenters remarked that modernizing the system of locks and dams on the upper Mississippi and Illinois Rivers is long overdue. The Upper Mississippi and Illinois Waterway System Navigation Study was begun in 1993 to address the need for navigation improvements on the navigation system. The feasibility study was paused in February 2001 in order to assess the results of a review by the National Research Council. The study was resumed in August 2001 and restructured to give equal consideration to fish and wildlife resources along with navigation improvement planning. An Interim Report will be completed in July 2002 that will provide a blueprint for completion of the feasibility study to ensure the waterway system continues to be a nationally treasured ecological resource as well as an effective transportation system. The feasibility study is scheduled for completion in 2004.

The Mississippi River and Tributaries Project (MR&T)

The Mississippi River and Tributaries (MR&T) project is 87 percent complete. However, levee work still remains to be done in the Memphis, New Orleans, and Vicksburg Districts. While the majority of the levee raising is in the Vicksburg District, substantial progress is being made. In Louisiana, approximately 114 miles of levee remain to be raised. Maximum deficiencies have been reduced from the 7- to 8-foot range to the 4- to 5-foot range with the most deficient areas being raised first. Also, approximately 24 miles of levee in Arkansas needs to be raised about 2 feet. We anticipate that the levee raise in Arkansas will not commence until some of the more deficient sections in Louisiana and Mississippi are complete. The Vicksburg District is committed to raising these levee sections as quickly as possible in order to protect the State of Louisiana.

A completion date of 2031 for the MR&T project was based on anticipated Congressional funding; however, the Corps of Engineers and the levee boards have indicated the capability to complete the levee enlargement program by 2020. In the last several years, the levee program has been funded to its capability. The Congress recognizes that the Corps must complete the levee enlargement as quickly as possible.

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Ports and Harbors (funding priorities)

Funding is ultimately based on national funding priorities. The Administration views commercial navigation as a core mission because of the widespread benefits it provides to the nation. The Fiscal Year 2003 budget gives priority to those ports and harbors that are used for commercial activities or subsistence fishing. Most of the larger ports and harbors provide a more significant economic return to the nation compared to smaller harbors. Likewise, among inland waterways, the budget gives precedence to waterway segments that have high commercial cargo volumes or low costs per ton-mile of commercial cargo.

Mississippi River -- policy on use of the 12-foot draft

In regard to a policy on use of the 12-foot draft, there is a procedure in place that allows the towing industry to utilize any additional draft the river provides. Channel condition information is coordinated through the Lower Mississippi River Committee (LOMRC), made up of representatives of the towing companies operating on the lower river. The group attempts to maximize the efficiency and safety of the waterway by ensuring that reasonable size tows and drafts are utilized for various river conditions. When the river approaches low water conditions, the committee hosts a conference call in which members of the Corps, Coast Guard, National Weather Service, and the towing industry discuss channel conditions, weather and river forecasts, and other pertinent issues. During these discussions a consensus is reached regarding appropriate draft and tow size. If restrictions are warranted, the Coast Guard, in conjunction with LOMRC, issues a draft and tow size "advisory" for the appropriate reach of the river. In addition to the advisories, any time a mariner reports a navigation problem to the Coast Guard, it is relayed to all mariners. These problems often involve shallow depths, which on the lower river is often 11 feet or less. The Lower Mississippi River Committee is currently co-chaired by Mr. Bruce Hussell, American River Transportation Company, (314) 481-8828, and by Mr. Thomas More, American Commercial Barge Lines, (812) 288-1941. The LOMRC is the primary entity which determines appropriate tow size and draft.

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Missouri River Master Manual Review and Update

The Mississippi Valley Division (MVD) continues to support Northwestern Division (NWD) efforts to identify an appropriate flow management plan that complies with laws and is consistent with contemporary needs of the Missouri and Mississippi River Basins. MVD has evaluated Mississippi River impacts for over 200 modified reservoir operation alternatives. The most recently evaluated alternatives included plans that incorporate a controlled spring rise and a split Missouri River navigation season. The impacts on Mississippi River flood stages and navigation efficiency were measurable but minor. The plans are beneficial to Mississippi River navigation during the traditionally low flow period of November and December. More detailed evaluations of Mississippi River environmental and dredging impacts are being continued for these alternatives.

The continuing evaluations are scheduled to be complete in early May 2002. The current NWD schedule for implementing a revision to the Master Manual requires that the Corps identify a Preferred Alternative (PA) by May 31, 2002. Upon identification of the PA, the Corps will consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) pursuant to Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). A Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), which presents a detailed analysis of the impacts of the PA, will be released this summer. Following a 30-day comment period for the FEIS, the Corps intends to complete ESA consultation on the PA with the USFWS, prepare a Record of Decision, revise the Master Manual itself, and incorporate the revised flow management plan into the annual operation plan. In its Biological Opinion of November 2000, USFWS recommended that a revised flow management plan be implemented no later than 2003. The Corps intends to have a new flow management plan in place by 2003 to comply with the Service's timeline.

IN GENERAL

National E-Charting Program

The Mississippi Valley Division (MVD) and the New Orleans District are working in a coordinated manner to define a national E-Charting program. Recent District activities include developing and issuing a contract for performing

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updates to the existing Inland Electronic Navigational Chart (IENC) for the Atchafalaya River and creating a provisional IENC for the Mississippi River from Baton Rouge to Mile 324. The contract also includes requirements for translating Mississippi River data into IENC for St. Louis and Vicksburg Districts. Other MVD activities include a pending contract to convert Memphis and Rock Island District data into IENC products. The Corps anticipates having provisional IENC coverage for the lower and middle part of the Mississippi River by the end of 2002.

The New Orleans District is finalizing an extensive local contract for work on the lower Mississippi River to take survey data, fly aerial photography, and perform extensive field data collection that will support higher quality IENCs for the portion of the Mississippi River within the boundaries of the New Orleans District.

The Corps of Engineers welcomes involvement from the various pilot organizations in providing comments and suggestions to improve the IENC products for the users. We encourage the waterway operators to invest in the type of navigation equipment that is necessary to test and utilize the system. Industry assistance and participation are vital for a successful E-Charting program.

The following sites have been established for interested parties to monitor the progress of the IENC system: <http://www.mvn.usace.army.mil/ENG/s-57/atchafalaya.asp> and <http://www.tec.army.mil/echarts/>.