



- News Home Page
- News Digest
- Nation**
- National Security
- Science
- Courts
- Columns
- Special Reports
- Search the Sites
- Photo Galleries
- Live Online
- Nation Index
- World
- Metro
- Business
- Washtech
- Sports
- Style
- Education
- Travel
- Health
- Home & Garden
- Opinion
- Weather
- Weekly Sections
- Classifieds
- Print Edition
- Archives
- Site Index
- Help

Engineers of Power: An Agency of Unchecked Clout

By Michael Grunwald
 Washington Post Staff Writer
 Sunday, September 10, 2000; Page A1

First of five articles

Page 2 of 3

The project would also boost agricultural production in Missouri when the government is spending billions to take flood-prone farmland out of production – and billions more to prop up and bail out farmers suffering from low prices, which have been depressed by overproduction. And while an executive order by President Clinton promoted "nonstructural" approaches to reducing flood damages, this levee-and-pump project is decidedly structural.

"On a lot of levels, the project makes no sense," said FEMA's Witt.

The Perennial Campaign

In the beginning the Mississippi ran free, meandering around hairpin turns, changing channels like a bored teenager. It was a complex river of sloughs, sandbars and side channels, flooding across its valley every spring, nourishing thick canopies of oak, cottonwood and cypress. Its bard, Mark Twain, wrote that mankind simply "cannot tame that

SITE S
 New
 Search

Photo Gallery

- [Corps of Engineers Projects](#)

Live Online

- Read a [transcript](#) of Michael Grunwald's discussion about the Corps.
- Read a [transcript](#) of Rep. Wayne Gilchrest's (R-Md.) discussion about the Corps.
- Read a [transcript](#) of a discussion with Tim Searchinger, senior attorney with Environmental Defense.

Related Documents

- [Strategic Vision](#) of the Army Corps of Engineers
- [Seven Substrategies of Corps Vision](#)
- [How the Corps Plans to Grow](#)

Special Report

- [U.S. Army Corps of Engineers](#)

About This Series

Sunday
LANDSCAPING AMERICA: How the Corps of Engineers has launched tens of billions of dollars worth of water projects around America, including many that damaged the environment.

MONDAY
CATERING TO CONGRESS: How the Corps has developed quid-pro-quo relationships with key members of Congress, executing questionable projects in their districts and yielding to them on regulatory decisions.

TUESDAY
DREDGING FOR DATA: How Corps planners have manipulated environmental and cost-benefit studies to justify massive projects, including the dredging of ports in Baltimore and along the East Coast.

WEDNESDAY



Partners

[BRITANNICA.COM](#)

Toolbox

- On the Web
- Census information
- Federal crime data
- Economy by region
- Stateline.org

mankind simply "cannot tame that lawless stream, cannot curb it or confine it, cannot say to it Go here or Go there, and make it obey."

The Corps of Engineers has never accepted "cannot."

Today the river has been tamed into a reliable commercial waterway by the Corps, confined within earthen levees by the Corps, straightened and shortened and simplified by the Corps. Its valley has been cleared and converted from swampland to farmland, and cities have sprouted along its banks. It has been imprisoned into a single channel, where its barges float half the nation's inland freight.

It's also a sick river.

Corps levees look like ordinary hills along the riverbank, but they have severed the Mississippi from more than 90 percent of its floodplain, eliminating millions of acres of wetlands that had attracted fish, shorebirds and other wildlife. Dams and dikes that stabilized the main barge channel have degraded biologically diverse back channels. The river's water quality has deteriorated steadily, pouring pesticides into the Gulf of Mexico's oxygen-deprived "dead zone." And changes in sediment flows have depleted Louisiana's coastal marshes, which are vanishing so fast that some experts are calling for a restoration project twice the size of the Everglades mission.

The story of the Mississippi is in many ways the story of the Corps' civil works program, which has focused on the river ever since Congress inaugurated it with \$75,000 in 1824. The transformation of the Mississippi reflects the can-do genius of the Corps, an energetic military organization that fortified Bunker Hill, built the Washington Monument, surveyed the West, dug the Panama Canal and supervised the Manhattan Project. (Its motto, "Essayons," is French for "Let us try.") But it also illustrates the hubris of the Corps, an agency that has historically treated nature as an enemy to be conquered, equating engineering and control with progress.

Today, its leaders speak about "working in harmony with nature," but the Corps still proudly mobilizes for its "Annual Campaign Against the Mighty Mississippi." Burton Kemp, a former Corps geologist in Mississippi, says no one should be surprised when the agency takes a militaristic approach to the environment. "I'm afraid it's not the Corps of Scientists. It's not the Corps of Biologists," he sighed. "It's the Corps of Engineers."

WEDNESDAY

PERMITTING POLLUTION: How the Corps has subordinated its responsibility to protect America's wetlands while granting more than one thousand permits for development in Alaska.

THURSDAY

RESTORING NATURE: How the Corps is seeking to reverse the damage it once did to Florida's Everglades, even as it struggles over its own future.



[E-Mail This Article](#)



[Printer-Friendly Version](#)



[Subscribe to The Post](#)

The Annual Campaign began in earnest after the Civil War, when a headstrong Corps general named Andrew Humphreys, fresh from losing half his division in the Union's disastrous charge at Fredericksburg, launched his equally disastrous "levees-only" policy for controlling the Mississippi. As John Barry recounted in his history, "Rising Tide," the plan was revealed as a colossal blunder in the 1927 flood, when levee breaks left nearly 1 million people homeless and 16 million acres underwater. Humphreys underestimated the power of the Mississippi, which drains two of every five drops of rain that fall on the continental United States. His levees cut off the river's outlets, so all that water squeezed between them had nowhere to go but up.

Nevertheless, Congress gave the Corps full power over the river in 1928, and the agency revised its strategy. It continued to strengthen and extend the Mississippi levees – they are now longer than the Great Wall of China – but it also built a system of reservoirs, cutoffs and diversions to ease the pressure on them. The system included the New Madrid Floodway, an emergency relief valve, 180 extra square miles of room for the river to spread out over in case of high water.

The plan called for the river to enter the floodway up in Birds Point, where the Corps would dynamite a hole in the levee, and return to its channel down in New Madrid, where the Corps left a 1,500-foot gap in the levee. The Corps executed the plan in 1937, and it helped save upstream communities such as Cairo, Ill. In 1997, the Corps again had barges loaded with explosives and ready to blow, but the upstream flood subsided just in time.

Here in the waterlogged agricultural bootheel of southeast Missouri, though, that gap is about as popular as the corn borer or boll weevil. The Corps has used the emergency plan to drown the area only once. But the Mississippi backs through the gap and into the floodway almost every spring, damaging crops, blocking roads, flushing thick streams of wriggling fish into the fields. The area is still known as Swampeast Missouri, and its residents see the gap as a physical symbol of unfairness, a separation between them and better-off, better-educated, better-protected communities.

The floodway project would finally close the gap.

"The Corps built flood control for everyone else: It's our turn now," says Martha Ellen Black, director of a family support center in East Prairie. "We don't deserve to live like people in a Third World country. We have a right to equal protection."

Closing the Gap

East Prairie sent President Clinton a strange promotional video a few years ago, almost bragging that half its 4,000 residents have no high

school diploma, that a third of them live in poverty. "Living the American Dream in East Prairie is a little harder," the narrator intoned. Today, town officials eagerly show off 1989 photographs of the public housing authority's offices underwater, of the nursing home surrounded by sandbags, of national champion oak trees drowning in an eight-foot deluge. Floods, they say, are the root of their problems.

And the Corps project is supposed to change everything.

Locals expect it to attract new businesses, ensure emergency access, promote tourism, bolster schools, revive civic pride, even stop mysterious waterborne fungal infections. And while East Prairie is not actually located in the floodway, supporters are quick to cite the project's benefits for the largest town that is, Pinhook, whose 52 residents all happen to be black; they settled in the floodway because whites wouldn't sell them land anywhere else.

The entire area considers the project a matter of survival – and an entitlement, since every other community along the Mississippi seems to have a Corps project. So Rep. Emerson has carried on a crusade begun by her late husband and predecessor, Rep. Bill Emerson, relentlessly pressuring Corps officials, lunching with Westphal, steering funds the project's way. She has also led the fight on Capitol Hill against the administration's efforts to "green" the Corps.

"The elite environmentalist types want to disenfranchise these people, but I'm going to fight for them," said Emerson, a former restaurant industry lobbyist who is a member of the Appropriations Committee. "They're an endangered species, too, as much as any of these mussels or fish or whatever."

Congress first authorized the levee closure in 1954, but the Corps never got the go-ahead to move dirt. Then in 1986, Bill Emerson tucked an expanded project into the Water Resources Development Act. That was not hard for a member of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, which oversees the Corps. On Capitol Hill, it is still considered almost bad form to oppose a water project in another member's district, much less a mere authorization, which does not ensure funding. Corps authorizations have long been viewed as congressional prerogatives, nearly as automatic as the franking privilege or special license plates.

But 1986 was the year President Reagan challenged the prerogative, holding a pork-loaded water bill hostage until Congress agreed to boost local cost-sharing requirements. That put the floodway project on hold, because the "local sponsor," the area's levee board, could not pay its share. The break came in 1994, when Clinton declared ailing East Prairie a rural "enterprise community," and Bill Emerson drafted an amendment allowing federal enterprise funds to cover most of the project's local burden. His amendment became law after his death in 1996, and Vice

President Gore's office approved the use of federal funds for the project.

So the Corps began a study.

The Corps is supposed to conduct objective studies of proposed water projects, but it also has an obvious interest in their outcome, since it only gets to build the projects it deems worthwhile. The agency's "Strategic Vision" specifically urges Corps commanders to "target new work," and several regional commanders have pledged to set specific goals for mission and budget growth. So there is a strong incentive for Corps study managers to reach pro-project conclusions: If they don't, key legislators get angry and the Corps doesn't grow.

In fact, one Corps memo last year announced that in order to "grow the civil works program," generals in headquarters and the Mississippi Valley Division had agreed to "get creative" with economic and environmental studies. "They will be looking for ways to get [studies] to 'yes' as fast as possible," it declared. "We have been encouraged to have our study managers not take 'no' for an answer. The push to grow the program is coming from the top down." And the administration has delegated all technical oversight of Corps studies back to the Corps; Westphal merely provides "policy review," and rarely alters recommendations.

The East Prairie study was assigned to the Memphis District, which is part of the Mississippi Valley Division. In April 1999, the district reached a preliminary conclusion that the benefits slightly outweighed the costs. Last week, the Corps issued its final report, conceding that the project would cause "some loss in wetland function and value" but proposing to "overcompensate" for the losses by planting oak trees on 9,500 acres.

"The Corps says this is a worthwhile project," said Terry Redfering, president of the local Chamber of Commerce. "What else is there to say?"

Quite a bit, according to environmentalists, anti-tax activists, scientists and economists. They point out that the Corps justified the project with 1996 crop prices, which have plummeted. It justified the levee portion with a 1954 interest rate, which has tripled. (The agency says it used the rate from the year the levee was first authorized.)

Corps documents also suggest the project will have little impact on most of East Prairie itself. The agency's analysts concluded that the town is now subject to flooding about once a decade – and will still be subject to flooding about once a decade when the project is done.

[Continue to Page 3 of 3](#)

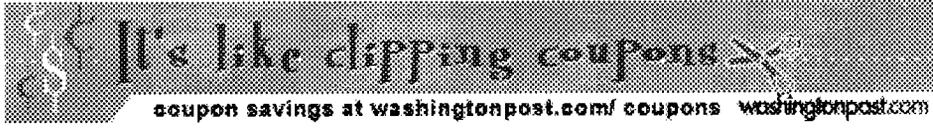
© 2000 The Washington Post Company

Peapod

Shop For Groceries Online!

Peapod 
Click Here and Save \$20
on Your First Order

 washingtonpost.com [Home](#) [Register](#) [Web Search](#)



- News Home Page
- News Digest
- #Nation**
- National Security
- Science
- Courts
- Columns
- Special Reports
- Search the States
- Photo Galleries
- Live Online
- Nation Index
- World
- Metro
- Business
- Wastech
- Sports
- Style
- Education
- Travel
- Health
- Home & Garden
- Opinion
- Weather
- Weekly Sections
- Classifieds
- Print Edition
- Archives
- Site Index
- Help

Partner
BRITANNICA.COM

Toolbox
 On the Web
 Census information
 Federal crime data
 Economy by region
 Stateline.org

Engineers of Power: An Agency of Unchecked Clout

By Michael Grunwald
Washington Post Staff Writer
Sunday, September 10, 2000; Page A1

First of five articles

Page 3 of 3

Instead, the Corps found that more than 90 percent of the project's benefits would go to local corn and soybean farmers, who could increase their yields a bit if they didn't have to worry about floods. According to county land maps, the five farmers on the levee board, the "local sponsor," own more than 15,000 acres in the affected floodplain. But when the nonprofit group Environmental Defense proposed a cheaper alternative designed to improve East Prairie's drainage but leave the already subsidized farmland alone, the Corps said no.

"This project is agricultural drainage masquerading as urban flood control," says Environmental Defense senior attorney Tim Searchinger. "It's a federal gift to a few special interests."

Meanwhile, biologists describe the project as an environmental catastrophe. It would break the last natural connection to the Mississippi between Cape Girardeau, Mo., and Helena,

SITE S
New

Search



Inter
Spo

Photo Gallery
 • [Corps of Engineers Projects](#)

Live Online
 • Read a [transcript](#) of Michael Grunwald's discussion about the Corps.
 • Read a [transcript](#) of Rep. Wayne Gilchrest's (R-Md.) discussion about the Corps.
 • Read a [transcript](#) of a discussion with Tim Searchinger, senior attorney with Environmental Defense.

Related Documents
 • [Strategic Vision](#) of the Army Corps of Engineers
 • [Seven Substrategies of Corps Vision](#)
 • [How the Corps Plans to Grow](#)

Special Report
 • [U.S. Army Corps of Engineers](#)

About This Series

Sunday
LANDSCAPING AMERICA: How the Corps of Engineers has launched tens of billions of dollars worth of water projects around America, including many that damaged the environment.

MONDAY
CATERING TO CONGRESS: How the Corps has developed quid-pro-quo relationships with key members of Congress, executing questionable projects in their districts and yielding to them on regulatory decisions.

TUESDAY
DREDGING FOR DATA: How Corps planners have manipulated environmental and cost-benefit studies to justify massive projects, including the dredging of ports in Baltimore and along the East Coast.

WEDNESDAY

Girardeau, Mo., and Helena, Ark., eliminating Missouri's last swath of backwater floodplain with direct access to the river. It would cut off the seasonal floods that sustain the area's giant bottomland hardwoods – and help fish spawn outside the Mississippi's punishing currents.

Overall, the Corps predicted the project will only eliminate 167 acres of wetlands overall, an estimate Searchinger said was "directly contradicted" by the agency's own data. The Corps acknowledged that it would reduce flooding on 8,000 acres of forested wetlands and 28,000 acres of agricultural wetlands. By contrast, in its regulatory role under the Clean Water Act, the Corps permitted more than 4,000 development projects last year, affecting less than 22,000 acres of wetlands.

The EPA has ranked the floodway project "environmentally unsatisfactory," its worst rating. The Fish and Wildlife Service and the Missouri Department of Conservation have been vehemently opposed, too. Robert Sheehan and Katie Dugger, scientists whose research the Corps relied on in its environmental analysis, have submitted affidavits flatly disputing that analysis, warning of severe impacts to mussels, fish and endangered least terns. Scientists and federal agencies have also said the Corps plan to "mitigate" the damages with reforestation is inadequate even if it works, and that it probably won't work.

Community leaders reply that agricultural wetlands shouldn't count as real wetlands, and that the project's opponents care more about shorebirds and fish than people. On a tour in his plane, Dee Dill, a farmer on the levee board, pointed out miles of cornfields puddled with rain. "This area isn't a swamp anymore; it's an agricultural community," he said. "It's fine if you want to save the world, but don't do it at our expense."

On a tour in a Missouri Department of Conservation skiff, David Wissehr, a wildlife biologist, showed the area from a different angle. He pointed out angular terns swooping into streams and ditches for fish, squeaking like trampolines. A silver carp jumped two feet out of a bayou. Great blue herons flapped above the oaks. "This is a special place, and there aren't a lot like it anymore," he said. "Cut it off from the river, and you kill it."

'America's River'

This spring, the White House went to war with the Corps over the

WEDNESDAY

PERMITTING POLLUTION: How the Corps has subordinated its responsibility to protect America's wetlands while granting more than one thousand permits for development in Alaska.

THURSDAY

RESTORING NATURE: How the Corps is seeking to reverse the damage it once did to Florida's Everglades, even as it struggles over its own future.

-  [E-Mail This Article](#)
-  [Printer-Friendly Version](#)
-  [Subscribe to The Post](#)

Mississippi River.

The battleground was a draft presidential order directing the Corps to "chart a new direction" for the river. The directive noted that studies have attributed half the nation's wetland losses to Corps projects along the Mississippi. It said that "the benefits of flood damage reduction have come at great expense to the floodplain and riverine ecosystems associated with the Mississippi River, which we have come to know as America's River."

The directive also would have forced the Corps to adopt higher environmental standards, review all projects affecting more than 500 acres of wetlands, and "ensure that federal water resource projects do not work against the purposes of other major federal programs, projects and expenditures."

In other words, it would have halted projects like East Prairie's.

Then Emerson found out about it. She promptly wrote a scathing letter to Clinton, calling the draft language "an extraordinary and damaging expansion of executive authority" and warning that it would "seriously undermine" federal antipoverty initiatives in the Mississippi Delta. She rounded up a bipartisan coalition of 45 co-signers. Rep. Bud Shuster (R-Pa.), the chairman of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, wrote his own blistering letter of protest. So did Sen. Christopher Bond (R-Mo.), the most aggressive supporter of the Mississippi River lock expansions further upstream.

That was the last anyone has heard about the "new direction" order. White House aides say it's on hold. "There's too much political heat," one said. They are afraid that if Clinton issues it, Congress will just block it with legislation.

"I think it's buried. I hope it's buried," Emerson said.

Emerson believes the Corps should stick to its current direction: controlling rivers, valuing farmers over wildlife, turning uninhabited wetlands into productive dry land. Corps defenders say that without its herculean efforts to reroute water, there would be no future for floodplain communities such as Omaha or St. Louis or New Orleans – or Pinhook, the little town in the floodway. Jim Robinson, the patriarch of Pinhook, believes that if the Corps can close the levee gap, blacks from all over Missouri will flock to the area, reviving his tiny community.

But environmentalists point out that the floodway was never supposed to attract a revival; it was supposed to remain undeveloped. That's the flip side of Corps flood control projects: They can instill a false sense of security, luring pioneers into floodplains, accelerating demands for even more protection. Despite \$100 billion worth of Corps projects, flood emergencies, damages and deaths are on the rise, and the federal

government is spending more money than ever to move Americans out of harm's way. Meanwhile, most of the wetlands of the Mississippi basin have been drained by farmers or paved by developers, often with Corps permits. That means that most of the runoff from 31 states and two Canadian provinces now flows straight to the river, which means that it takes less water to create a horrific flood.

"We could be headed for 1927 all over again," warned Ron Nassar, coordinator of the Lower Mississippi Valley Conservation Committee, a group representing natural resource agencies from eight states. "This is a turning point for the Corps."

Environmentalists and administration officials want the Corps to turn from structural flood "control" to non-structural flood damage reduction: buying and reforesting floodplain farmland, waterproofing and elevating homes and roads, leaving nature to its own devices and moving people away from water. The idea is to save wildlife while reducing the amount of marginal farmland and river's-edge development the government needs to bail out after floods, and spending less money on giant engineering projects.

The president's Council on Environmental Quality is no longer pressing to revamp the Corps approach to flood control. But it is still considering a move to hold up three particularly intrusive structural projects. One is the floodway plan in Missouri. The other two are in the Mississippi Delta itself: the Big Sunflower River dredging project and the Yazoo Pump. The \$62 million Big Sunflower initiative could endanger an ancient mussel colony believed to be the world's densest concentration of living creatures. The original plan for the \$181 million pump proposed to drain three times as much wetlands acreage as the floodway project in Missouri.

The three projects are all designed to divert water away from farmers, to help them increase their yields. But the farm economy is swooning, despite record yields and record levels of federal largess. Sam Hamilton, the Fish and Wildlife Service's Southeast regional director, recently suggested in a harsh letter to the Corps that the agrarian status quo is "unsustainable" and that its policies have been "instrumental in transforming" an ecologically vibrant Mississippi River ecosystem "into a region that is considered impoverished by most social, economic and environmental standards."

But even if Clinton does try to stop the projects before his term ends, he will have to contend with Emerson, not to mention Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) and Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Thad Cochran (R-Miss.), the protectors of the Delta projects. As Sen. George Voinovich (R-Ohio) blurted out at a recent hearing, the Corps doesn't necessarily answer to the president. Voinovich, chairman of the subcommittee that oversees the Corps, pointedly reminded his colleagues who really decides which water projects become reality.

"We don't care what the Corps cost-benefit is," Voinovich said. "We're going to build it anyhow because Congress says it's going to be built. Somebody's in charge of some appropriations committee, or another committee, and jams it through."

[Back to Page 1](#)

© 2000 The Washington Post Company

