

Mississippi Flood Disaster Reveals Epic Policy Fiasco

by Marcia Merry Baker

May 12—The worsening flood destruction in the Mississippi Basin, mitigated by structures and actions of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, shows—not the wrath of nature, which is fierce—but the policy failure of recent decades, up through and including the Obama Administration’s pretense of concern, which is to offer only “disaster-as-usual” bloviating, token aid, or outright denial of Federal relief. Obama is offering the “Haiti treatment” to millions of people throughout the flood zone.

The vast flood damage in the Mississippi/Missouri/Ohio Basin—the third-largest drainage basin in the world (after the Amazon and Congo), covering all or part of 31 states, results from the years-long policy of suppressing needed science, R&D, infrastructure, and economic activity to support and protect the nation.

To begin with, there has been a longtime suppression of work to understand “the weather,” imposed by cutbacks in resources for NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration), NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), the USGS (U.S. Geological Survey) and related agencies, and also re-



FEMA/Ed Edahi

The devastation along the Mississippi has not been caused by an “act of God”; rather, it is the result of the Obama Administration applying the “Haiti treatment” to the flood-ravaged region. Here is metropolitan Memphis, Tenn., on May 8. By May 10, the river’s crest was at 47.87 feet, just below the 1937 record of 48.7 feet.

sulting from the insinuation of pseudo-environmentalist, global-warming hokum throughout U.S. science institutions.

Secondly, flood-protection programs and large-scale water-management systems have been undermined, both by Federal underfunding, and by deliberately obstructive environmentalist “impact” demands

and lawsuits. These have been instigated by agencies and figures associated with Wall Street/London-centered financial circles, opposed to national development. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), signed into law on Jan. 1, 1970, was the benchmark in this subversion.

For years, the Army Corps, mandated since 1927 to control floods, has seen its proposals held up, only partially funded, or even blocked throughout the Mississippi/Missouri/Ohio Basin, and elsewhere. Aspects of what are lacking in the four basic features of flood control, are reported below—levees, floodways (diversions), river channel maintenance, and tributary controls.

The structures, staffing, and logistics capacity which the Corps does have in place in the Mississippi/Ohio watersheds, are working spectacularly in the current emergency. So are collaborating agencies, the National

Guard, local police, fire and emergency officials, and thousands of volunteers. But where the flood control structures were never built; where they were constructed, but neglected; and wherever there are staff shortages, then danger and damage result.

This is the policy disaster. The excuse has been, “There isn’t enough money.” All the while, the rake-offs to Wall Street and London keep flowing, to reach the stage of multi-trillion-dollar bail-outs, hyperinflation, and economic breakdown.

What is essential for a radical shift to a sane policy, is reinstatement of the Glass-Steagall law, for which an emergency mobilization is now underway. Glass-Steagall makes way for credits for upgrading water and land management, and for launching science programs in full. Along with short term, all-out rescue and rebuilding efforts, Glass-Steagall restoration is the critical measure for full-scale disaster relief and recovery.

Mississippi Delta: Epic Flooding

As of mid-May, the Mississippi high waters have rolled relentlessly along, now reaching the states of Mississippi and Louisiana, the Delta lands. One large diversion channel—the Bonnet Carré—has so far been opened in the Delta, and the other, the Morganza Spillway, is at the ready for activation, as soon as the river flow reaches a trigger rate of 1.5 million cubic feet per second (cfs) at the Red River Landing, which is expected around May 15. Upstream, where the Ohio and Mississippi join, the large Birds Point-New Madrid Spillway is now activated.

On May 3, the Birds Point levee was breached, in Missouri, on the west bank of the Mississippi near Cairo, Ill., where the Ohio River enters the Mississippi. High water was diverted into the Birds Point/New Madrid Floodway, to rejoin the Mississippi downstream, which lowered the height and pressure of water on levees at Cairo.

On May 9, the Bonnet Carré Spillway was activated, diverting water eastward into Lake Ponchartrain, and thence to the Gulf of Mexico, bypassing New Orleans. This spillway, completed in 1931, was last used in 2008.

On May 15 or thereabouts, it is expected that the Morganza Spillway will be activated, also to relieve New Orleans. Completed in 1954, it has been used only once before, in 1973. Flood waters will flow through the Atchafalaya River swamplands, and into the Gulf.

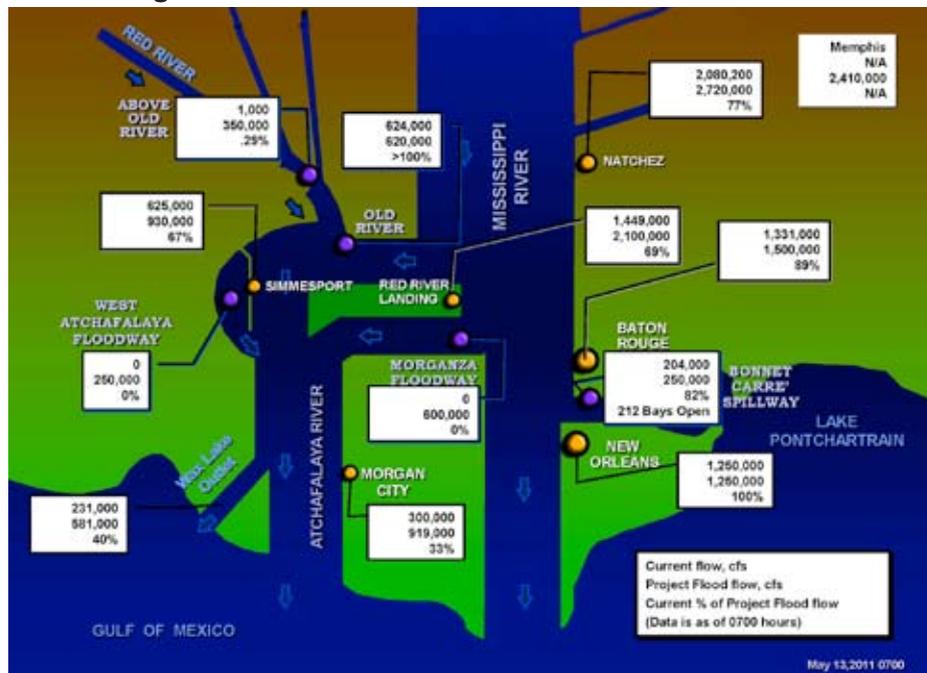
Using the spillways will flood farm operations, displace people, animals, and plantlife, but spare other,



U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

On May 9, the Bonnet Carré Spillway was activated (as seen here), diverting water eastward into Lake Ponchartrain, and thence to the Gulf of Mexico, bypassing New Orleans.

FIGURE 1
Current High Water Flows



This schematic, dated May 13, indicates the status of the high water flow along the Mississippi River and its tributaries, based on monitoring by the Corps of Engineers.

more highly concentrated centers of activity, from devastation. The two spillways are expected to depress the river level in New Orleans down to 17 feet, when it crests on May 24, four feet below the 1927 record of a 21-foot crest.

Near, or absolute record-setting flood levels, have been recorded in the lower Ohio Valley and at points all along the Mississippi, as the crest slowly moves south. The combination of a large snowmelt, and severe rainstorms in the Basin, made for huge run-off.

On May 10 in Memphis, the crest was 47.87 feet (14.5 meters), just below the 1937 record of 48.7 feet at this city.

On May 19, at Vicksburg, the crest is expected to be 57.5 feet, which is 1.5 feet above the 1927 all-time record.

Upper Watersheds: TVA Proof of Principle

These huge floods would be even worse, were it not for run-off control systems holding back flows in the tributaries of the Mississippi. For example, the dams in the famous Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) were designed to help in flood mitigation—as well as power, irrigation, recreation, etc.—in the large, multi-state catch-

ment area upstream from where the Tennessee joins the Mississippi at Paducah, Ky. In late Winter, the TVA made ready for anticipated Spring rains and snowmelt, by drawing down its lakewaters, to then later, in April, open storage space to capture and hold back waters during the peak run-off/rain period.

In the state of West Virginia, where many of its rivers flow directly into the Ohio, the Corps activated every dam and lake to impound the maximum water during the flood period. West Virginia lakes were so swollen, that most state parks and recreational areas were closed for safety. As the Ohio began to recede, the Corps safely started releasing the lakewaters.

The Ohio River system—which includes the Tennessee watershed, accounts for 75% of the flow at the mouth of the Mississippi. The bad flooding in the river counties of Indiana, Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri, Tennessee, and southward, would have been far, far worse, without the TVA and other upper watershed storage on the Ohio Basin system.

However, in many other upper watersheds—such as those running off the Ozarks in Missouri, southward into Arkansas, thence into the Mississippi River, water management structures are lacking or ill-maintained. They are not the responsibility of the Corps—whose mission is to see to the mainstem rivers, ports, and so on. The upper watershed installations on tributaries mostly belong to various local entities, plus local partners of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Corps may inspect them, but that’s all.

For example, on the Black River in southeastern Missouri, the levee in Poplar Bluff broke on April 26, and over 1,000 persons had to evacuate. The Black River flows into the White River in Arkansas, where on many streams, levees failed. Dozens of smaller levees broke in other states.

At a press briefing that day, Tony Hill, Corps spokesman for emergency management at Little Rock, Ark., said that the Poplar Bluff levee received an “unaccept-



U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Lyndon LaRouche pointed to the threat to the U.S. food supply, in a recent discussion: “What do these heavy storms do to the planting season?... You’re going to lose significant parts of the food supply, at the source, inside the United States, as a result of these floods.”

able” rating by Corps engineers at their 2008 inspection, but nothing was done to rehabilitate it. No funding came forth. He said that this kind of problem is “systemic” among the thousands of such flood-control structures in the country. The Army Corps barely has the means to inspect them. Neither the Corps nor other agencies are then deployed to maintain these levees, which are the property of various local authorities—counties, levee districts, and others—which no longer have any resources for upkeep. The Black River, which flows southward into Arkansas from the Ozarks, and other secondary rivers, have many substandard flood embankments.

Corps Stripped Down

The Army Corps itself is down to only 34,600 civilian and 650 military men and women. Over a third of the total workforce has been recycled through Iraq and Afghanistan. The total roster is way down from the 47,000 it stood at barely 15 years ago. At present, out of the eight Corps divisions for the continental U.S.A., two are working flat-out—the Mississippi Valley Division, and the Great Lakes and Ohio River Division.

It is highly relevant that the Obama Administration intends to *cut* the Corps budget. What a contrast with President Franklin Roosevelt, who, in the comparable 1937 floods, mobilized the manpower available in the

Works Progress Administration (WPA) to set up shelters, help with relocation, and shore up levees.

“Fatigue has been a factor,” said Col. Vernie Reichling, head of the Corps Memphis District, at a May 3 press conference in Sikeston, Mo. “Some of our people have worked 24-36 hours straight. They’ve been working with high explosives, and there is a concern for safety. We have been constantly adjusting to conditions. The conditions Mother Nature threw at us were severe.”

Reichling had to delay the third of three explosive blasts, in the activation of the Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway operation, to redirect some of the Mississippi flow, because he ran out of explosives for the second of two outflow crevasses (to let flood-water back into the main Missis-

issippi), and had to procure more. The blast was successfully executed on May 5. Reichling also pointed out that his 150-man Corps crew needed the time to rest.

Vast Agriculture Damage

There is vast damage to farm operations—land, buildings, livestock, storage, and transportation—now worsening under the flooding and extreme storms in the Mississippi/Ohio Basins Corridor, and at the same time, in the April tornado-storm belt; and under drought conditions in Texas.

Beyond immediate rescue operations, for livestock, moving machinery to high ground and other emergency actions, the policy question of food security it posed.

Lyndon LaRouche, on the LPAC-TV Weekly Report April 27, put the food question forward concretely, in discussing the breakdown of not only the economic system, but of economic policy:

“What about the areas of flooding in this central region of the United States? We’re now in the area of the planting season. What do these heavy storms do to the planting season?”

“Now, what would you do, normally, under a sane economy, with heavy rainstorms of this type flooding the area, in terms of the planting system? You re-seed; you plant the seeds. What is going to happen now, under this government, and its policies? *There is no funding for re-*

seeding. So you're going to lose significant parts of the food supply, at the source, inside the United States, as a result of these floods."

Only 9% of the U.S. national corn crop was planted as of late April, just when the storms slammed the Mississippi Basin and other farm areas, in contrast to 46% a year ago, same time, according to the USDA April 24 Crop Planting Progress Report. This lag reflects the fact it has been too cold and wet in some of the northerly latitudes, to risk planting. Corn won't germinate in ground temperatures less than 50° F; but waiting for a late start has other risks. If, by about mid-May, 85% of the U.S. national corn crop is not successfully sown or re-sown, there will be higher risks that yields will fall in what's planted later.

However, the Obama Administration is barely even going through the motions. On May 3, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and FEMA Director W. Craig Fugate issued a joint pledge to aid the farm operations now under water in the national Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway. In the face of White House prevarication, on top of uncertainty and damage, the floodway farmers have resorted to impotently suing the Corps.

Obama's Haiti Treatment for Midwest Flooding

Given the mega-flooding, the threat of more severe weather ahead, the food question, and the prospect of vast aid needed to rebuild, the White House response of "disaster-as-usual" pretenses is a glaring mockery. Obama, the Agriculture Department, and other agencies are doing the minimum everywhere.

Obama has been selectively announcing approval for, or denial of, official disaster declarations in certain counties in Tennessee, Mississippi, Kentucky, Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana; he previously announced Federal recognition of disaster counties elsewhere in the flood zone. The Presidential disaster declaration authorizes FEMA and Homeland Security to provide aid and *partial* funding. "Emergency protective measures, limited to direct Federal assistance, will be provided at 75% Federal funding." In other words,



FEMA/Marilee Caliendo

Obama's criminal neglect in denying Federal relief to flood-stricken regions of the United States has real consequences, as can be seen in this photo from Memphis, dated May 9.

the locals—already economically destroyed by the Obama "recovery," and now literally underwater, are supposed to come up with the rest!

As of the end of the first week in May, an unofficial *EIR* tally of the number of counties now designated as official disasters by the Federal government, or requested for that designation by their governors, reached over 240 in just the 13 states of the Mississippi-Ohio Basin, and the Southern part of Tornado Alley.

In addition there are dozens more disaster counties in other states, resulting from diverse other weather events, such as six counties in Iowa, granted official disaster status May 6, from April tornado storms. In North Dakota on May 6, the governor asked for 39 counties and three Indian reservations to be approved for Federal assistance because of Spring floods.

These counties, and dozens of cities, are in no position at all to even meet the criteria of covering 25% of any disaster aid given by FEMA. In just seven weeks, the budget year ends for most all U.S. states, and any fiscal pretense that may have been kept, is now gone, gone, gone. Most of the United States' 3,000 counties are in the same position, even without a physical disaster.

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