

# The Army Corps of Engineers' deaf ear

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The St. Louis District of the Army Corps of Engineers recently approved plans to construct new dike complexes in the middle Mississippi River, despite vigorous and unanimous opposition by local residents. In its single-minded drive to construct more and more dikes, the district is deaf to national scientific and environmental groups, deaf to local residents, and deaf even to suggestions that further construction impedes rather than facilitates barge traffic.

The 190 miles of the middle Mississippi, between the Missouri and Ohio rivers, already have more than 1,375 river training structures, making it the most densely diked river in the world. All to facilitate navigation. Averaging seven dikes every mile, it's hard to imagine the need for more, but the corps is in the midst of a new wave of dike construction.

In February, the district held a hearing on the projects in Wolf Lake, Ill., as part of its impact review, as required by the National Environmental Policy Act. These reviews give stakeholders a meaningful say in projects that can have a profound impact on their communities and the environment. Unfortunately, the district has little interest in conducting a proper NEPA review of their plans.

The projects — located near Wolf Lake — would include 18 new structures, including one type never tested on any real-world river. These structures reduce, alter and eliminate aquatic habitat; change river flow dynamics; and increase flood heights. Disturbingly, the proposed dikes will be located near levees that recently failed inspections or were overtopped.

The hearing in Wolf Lake was a model of democracy — crowded with teachers, students, levee board members, local leaders, scientists, environmentalists and numerous floodplain residents. Participants courteously listened to the district's presentations then presented their own information and concerns. One participant helped build dikes but expressed concern that so many new dikes now impede, not aid, shipping. Another speaker asked the audience to raise their hands if they supported a moratorium on river training structures. We couldn't see a single person without their hand up — except district staff. In written comments, one participant exhorted: "My family has lived in this area for five generations. I don't want to be the last generation to live here."

Minutes after the meeting, the district staff told local media that they will move forward with the projects regardless of public input. Indeed, the district recently announced that it would proceed with construction. Deafness is a problem across many corps districts. By the time local residents even hear about projects, plans are typically so far advanced that the corps turns a deaf ear to grassroots concerns, no matter how reasonable. In the case of navigation, this is because the corps views the barge

companies as their clients — even though the navigation industry contributes only about 10 percent toward its own infrastructure. Corps river projects are developed in close cooperation with these clients and advanced by political patrons.

The corps has pushed any number of large-scale and highly destructive projects despite broad-based opposition from the public, conservationists and scientists. The Yazoo Pumps project in Mississippi is an example. Hundreds of scientists, over a hundred conservation groups, and tens of thousands citizens opposed this project, which would have destroyed 200,000 acres of wetlands. But the corps recommended it anyway.

In candid moments, corps officials confide that they occupy an untenable position — caught between multiple competing pressures. And while perhaps true, the biggest advocate for new dike complexes appears to be the corps itself. Moreover, being in the center of complex and contentious issues does not justify simply tuning out the legitimate concerns of the public, scientists and conservation organizations.

In the case of the proposed new dike complexes on the Mississippi, floodplain residents deserve to be taken seriously. For decades, St. Louis District engineers have made a business of transforming the middle Mississippi into a narrow chute that is bad for native species, prone to larger and larger floods, and increasingly challenging — even for navigation.

On the middle Mississippi, and nationwide, we need to stop following infrastructure strategies developed decades ago. The corps needs a new vision that reflects 21st century water resources goals, including healthy ecosystems, resilience to natural disasters and democratic management of our nation's rivers.

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