Department of the Army Community Relations Awards Program of Excellence

# Category A: Individual Achievement
# U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
# Omaha District
# Flooding, Invasive Species and Water Supply STRATCOMS

**Nominee:** Missouri River Joint Information Center, U.S. Army Engineer District, Northwestern Division

**Army Service Component Command:** U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

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DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
CORPS OF ENGINEERS, OMAHA DISTRICT
1616 CAPITOL AVENUE
OMAHA NE 68102-4901

REPLY TO
ATTENTION OF

CENWO-DE

25 January 2012

MEMORANDUM FOR HQUSACE-PA (Mr. Bernard Tate, Manager, Herbert A. Kassner Program), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Public Affairs, Washington, DC 20314-1000

SUBJECT: Nomination for MG Keith L. Ware Public Affairs Award, Community Relations Category

1. Monique L. Farmer of the Public Affairs Office, Omaha District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is nominated for the MG Keith L. Ware Public Affairs Award in the Community Relations Category (Individual Achievement) for her superior achievement in Flooding, Invasive Species and Water Supply Strategic Communication Plans.

2. Ms. Farmer demonstrated efforts above and beyond the call of duty to ensure the Omaha District Public Affairs Office was poised to keep the communities within the Omaha District Area of Operations informed about the district's operations during calendar year 2011, especially relating to flooding, invasive species and water supply. During the Missouri River Flood of 2011, she played a critical role as the Media Relations Team lead in the temporarily established Missouri River Joint Information Center which included developing the strategic communications plan for regional communication efforts, including strategies, measurement tactics, tools, messaging and evaluation. When invasive zebra mussel species were discovered at Lake Zorinsky in Omaha, she worked closely with the project delivery team to develop a well thought out and executed strategic communications plan for handling the public and the media. She was also took a proactive role in assisting the project manager with messages, talking points and communication tools for the highly visible Lake Sakakawea Surplus Water Supply Report.

3. I strongly endorse Ms. Farmer's nomination in this category. My point of contact for additional information is Maggie Oldham, Chief of Public Affairs, Omaha District, 402-995-2416.

Encl
Nomination Package

ROBERT J. RUCH
Colonel, EN
Commanding

Department of the Army Community Relations Awards Program of Excellence

# Category A: Individual Achievement
# U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
# Omaha District
# Flooding, Invasive Species and Water Supply STRATCOMS

**JUSTIFICATION:** The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District office is headquartered in downtown Omaha, Nebraska. Keeping the community informed of the district's operations is an effort that requires outreach and building a good rapport with the media for use as a conduit to help get the word out about the work the Corps is doing.

During calendar year 2011, Sr. Public Affairs Specialist Monique Farmer demonstrated efforts above and beyond the call of duty to ensure the Omaha District Public Affairs Office was poised to keep the communities within the Omaha District Area of Operations informed about work the Corps is involved with.

As the lead action officer for Missouri River Water Management communications, she supports the Northwestern Division water management staff by providing them with professional advice and counsel, serving as the spokesperson on Missouri River Water Management issues and responding to other public affairs-related needs.

During historic flooding along the Missouri River this past summer, Ms. Farmer served as the Media Relations Team lead in the temporarily established Missouri River Joint Information Center (MRJIC) from May 30, 2011 to Sept. 30, 2011. The team included various public affairs specialists with varying levels of expertise from around the country. Team members rotated in and out of the center throughout the 4-month period. As the team lead, she developed the strategic communications plan for regional communication efforts, including strategies, measurement tactics, tools, messaging and evaluation. She also assigned team members various social media, video, writing and photography tasks and proactive news pitching tasks, and daily reporting to headquarters tasks. In addition, she served as spokesperson for the region throughout the flood event, providing information to regional and national newspapers including prominent media such as the Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, New York Times and CNN.

Other leadership responsibilities in the JIC included organizing editorial board meetings, researching and writing Op-Ed columns for the division commander, and providing media training and on-camera interview preparation for the Commanding General of NWD, Omaha District Commander, Kansas City District Commander, Chief, Water Management Division and Deputy Program Manager for live Defense Video and Imagery Distribution Center interviews held once the Corps reached historic flows on the Missouri River. Each subject matter expert conducted a full day of live interviews with the Weather Channel and local television news affiliates and radio stations.

Anticipating a need for tracking interactions with the media and the public in order to be more proactive and provide better service to both audiences, she developed the concept for district's media query database, which is now part of the district's PAO SOP. The tool is used to track count of media queries, interactions with the media for media relations analysis, future communications strategies, and recall of previous interactions.

Outside of her support to division, Ms. Farmer has provided expert advice and counsel, and served as the spokesperson for the district to local, regional and national media. Her communications advice and counsel efforts have often required an awareness of multiple projects in order to develop communications plans that entail a strategic approach that considers all of the Corps' efforts collectively as opposed to a single project communications plan approach.

Ms. Farmer has provided expert advice and counsel to multiple project managers on a number of high-profile projects to include the Lake Sakakawea Surplus Water Supply Study (which entailed working with a vertical project delivery team that spanned from the district through headquarters and the Assistant Secretary of the Army's office), the Missouri River Authorized Purposes Study and the Lake Zorinsky Zebra Mussels.

As the district became acclimated to running its social networking sites early in the year, Monique helped provide vision and focus for social media efforts.

She provided on-the-job training and support to two new PA Office employees to help familiarize them with Omaha District mission, projects/project managers, activities, and standard operating procedures for the Public Affairs Office.

Prior to Congress' decision not to provide funding for FY12 for the Missouri River Authorized Purposes Study, Ms. Farmer served as PAO's Lead action officer and spokesperson for Missouri River Authorized Purposes Study. She developed and maintained updates of the project delivery team's strategic communications plan and worked closely with the lead project manager to provide interview preparation, coordinate interviews with the media and offer communications advice and counsel.

In the aftermath of the Flood of 2011, she volunteered to speak to civic and professional organizations as a member of Omaha District PAO Speakers' Bureau.

Ms. Farmer continues to seek opportunities for personal and professional development. Most recently, she graduated from the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce's Leadership Omaha Program. The Leadership program provided overview of city of Omaha leadership, individual and team leadership styles, and strategies and created networking opportunities. She tapped her contacts from the program in the midst of the flood fight to take advantage of public outreach opportunities for educating local Omahans about the Corps' flood fight efforts.

She continues to take advantage of opportunities for professional development, having recently completed an online Advertising and Research course in December 2011. The course provided instruction on industry standard methods of conducting and evaluating research, skills she now applies to the development and evaluation of the district's strategic communications plans.

Ms. Farmer's talent for follow-through has helped her cultivate professional and collegial relationships with project managers and subject matter experts on various projects throughout the district. Her efforts have helped strengthen the district's outreach and communications efforts, as well as relationships with media in our area of operations.

Below, I will discuss three of the most prominent projects Ms. Farmer contributed to during 2011.

**Missouri River Flood of 2011**

**RESEARCH:** When the Missouri River basin faced record flows and flooding as the result of above-normal snowpack and extraordinary rain events (3 to 6 times normal) during the last few weeks of May 2011 the Northwestern Division stood up the Missouri River Joint Information Center, a single point of communications for the release of information. The center was established to ensure timely and coordinated release of accurate information to the public. Its center was located in Omaha, Nebraska and combined personnel from Northwestern Division, Omaha and Kansas City Districts for crisis communications.

Ms. Farmer served as the Media Relations Team Lead in charge of all communications with the media for the Center. Due to the crisis communications nature of the event, the leadership role required her to work for days on end. In a few instances, covering 15 to 16 hour shifts for three weeks straight.

Public affairs and outreach specialists combined with headquarters provided public affairs assets who had been trained and certified to provide public affairs support to emergency response missions through the Corps' External Support Function 15 Mission.

Ms. Farmer organized primary and secondary research efforts, which included personal interviews with subject matter experts including the Chief of Water Management Division, a 27-year Corps veteran, and other project managers familiar with the Missouri River. The interviews provided the communications team with a better understanding of the history of the development of the current Missouri River Master Manual, key basin stakeholders and their roles and the primary concerns of citizens and interested government entities and other parties. The master manual is a water control plan used to guide the regulation of the river. It describes the regulating and operating guidelines used by the Corps for the Missouri River.

Input from the interviews was used in the development of fragmented public affairs guidance documents written to address specific topics such as the 2011 Release Schedule, the Missouri Master Manual, Levee Breaches, 500-year data and climate change to name a few. The FRAGPAGS were developed as proactively as possible following end of day evening hot wash meetings and brainstorming sessions to prepare for potential upcoming issues. The team gauged the need for creating additional FRAGPAGS based on daily and weekly media analysis, rumor mill management and the most frequently asked questions received through the call center.

Secondary research included the review of past documentation of both internal and external Corps of Engineers documents. Examples of documents consulted included emergency response to potential flooding operations, fragmentary orders, warning orders and other public affairs guidance, after action reports and an Omaha District pre-developed crisis communications plan written in the aftermath of the 2010 high runoff season and emergency response efforts provided to Jamestown, North Dakota. Communications plans for similar efforts ranging as far back as 1997 to as recent as 2010, as well as standard operations plans and Continuity of Operations Plans were consulted. Previous years' Web sites were also reviewed and prepared in advance of the 2011 runoff season. Details and circumstances encompassing other historic floods on the Missouri River were also researched, including the most frequently referenced: 1952, 1993 and the 1997 floods.

Past news articles were retrieved to gain a better understanding of the concerns of the media and the public for the development of the audience analysis section of the strategic communications plan.

Please see Appendix A to view two articles that ran in the Omaha World-Herald. The first article ran following the flood event, and the second ran during the flood. Ms. Farmer organized a three-hour interview that resulted in the first article. She also organized the Editorial Board meeting that resulted in the second.

**PLANNING:** The planning phase of strategic communications for the Missouri River Flood of 2011 included setting goals, conducting target audience analysis and justification, and identifying communications tools and tactics. Refining operational definitions for later evaluation of progress was also an important part of the process.

Ms. Farmer consulted several Public Relations textbooks to ensure the plan was aligned with the latest in industry standard practices and measurement tactics.

**IMPLEMENTATION:** The communications plan was implemented in five phases over a period of approximately four months. The implementation of the plan included requiring each public affairs staff member assigned to answering phones to complete a media query form to record and track all media interactions. Ms. Farmer ensured that a staff representative from the media relations team listened into important daily hydrological and crisis communication meetings. Attendance was critical for remaining apprised of the daily changes in operations and challenges encountered throughout the flood fight. The staff also conducted daily task preparation for the evening call-in press conference.

She helped generate story ideas for the Corps' YouTube Channel and oversaw the development of a Special Edition magazine style publication called "Operation Mighty Mo" to keep the region informed.

Most notable were her efforts to keep the team focused on execution while simultaneously gathering enough relevant data during the management of a crisis to conduct a meaningful evaluation of the team's strategic communications efforts.

**EVALUATION:** Ms. Farmer's efforts significantly contributed to the media relation team's overall success in meeting five primary goals during the execution of the strategic communications plan for the Missouri River Flood of 2011.

Results from media and stakeholder surveys helped gauge the public's perception of the Corps and how well the Corps met the media and the public's needs through the Missouri River Joint Information Center.

The media survey was distributed to 490 members of the media using the same contact list the center used to distribute information to media throughout the flood event. 122 of the emails returned as failures, yielding successful delivery to 368 members of the media. 39 members of the media completed the survey, which resulted in a response rate of about 9.4%. 59% of the respondents stated they felt as though the Corps met its goal to provide up-to-date information for the region through the Missouri River nightly call-in press conferences.

66.7% of the media survey respondents indicated they felt the Missouri River Joint Information Center media relations call center functioned well and was sufficient for their needs. Other areas with ratings of effective included: news releases (50% of respondents provided an effective rating), media interview availability (56.4%), printed publications (46.2%), Operation Mighty Mo Facebook (43.6%), Omaha District Facebook (43.6%).

In addition to improvement suggestions, some members of the media offered kudos in their remarks, stating: "daily emails were outstanding," "I found questions and comments insightful and useful," and "I think it was a model operation" to highlight a few.

For the purposes of the stakeholder survey, stakeholders included elected officials, states, Tribes, and local and county emergency management officials. A total of 57 surveys were completed. 57.1% of the respondents found news releases effective. 50% of respondents stated that media interviews and printed publications were effective in providing information on the flood fight through a number of venues.

Key messages and talking points developed were deemed appropriate for the identified publics and appeared to do a good job of accurately reflecting the command position. Statistics gathered may serve as a foundation for future reservoir management and emergency response communications.

**Lake Zorinsky Zebra Mussels**

**RESEARCH:** In late November 2010, a boy scout notified the Corps that he had discovered what he knew to be a zebra mussel at Lake Zorinsky in Omaha, Nebraska. Zebra mussels are an invasive species that tend to populate at rapid speed increasing to infestation levels many times within a matter of months. They can be disastrous to lakes where they clog water intakes and prevent recreation activities such as boating or walking barefoot around a lake. Zorinsky opened in 1993 after the Corps leased the land to the City of Omaha. A popular recreation area for many Omaha citizens, the park includes two playgrounds, several playing fields and multiple

picnic areas and tree-lined trails. The small lake is approximately 3.15 miles and the big lake is 4.44 miles around.

Ms. Farmer provided advice and counsel to the project manager Jolene Hulsing, developing informational handouts and assisting with media attending the first of several public meetings held directly following the discovery of zebra mussels.

Community members and the media attended to ask questions about the future of the Lake. In the meantime, engineers developed a plan of action, contacting the Corps Engineering Research and Development Laboratory for information about past discoveries of zebra mussels at other lakes and how those incidents were handled. Initial reporter reactions to the news coverage seemed accusatory, suggesting that the Corps was not being transparent and forthcoming with the information it had. The project delivery team decided to drawdown the water level at the lake, taking advantage of freezing temperatures and ultimately killing off the population of zebra mussels that were present in the lake at the time (December 2010).

Ms. Farmer worked closely with the project delivery team to develop a strategic communications plan for handling the public and the media. The research section of the plan entailed looking into the history of the lake and how it was used, delving into the public's use of the lake and where the majority of primary users were from in order to gain a better understanding of that audience, interviewing members of the project delivery team to gain a better understanding of the information gleaned from ERDC regarding how to handle zebra mussels invasions and interviews with the State of Nebraska's Invasive Species Coordinator and reviewing the process involved with complying with the National Environmental Policy Act.

The project communication goals for Lake Zorinsky Zebra Mussels included ensuring Omaha District decisions, processes, operations and procedures are clearly communicated to the public and interested parties, executing efforts to control zebra mussels in Zorinsky Lake in a timely manner, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (and in collaboration with partner agencies) and managing a long-term communications plan for controlling zebra mussels in the lake with clearly identified roles for each of the agencies involved with the effort.

Ms. Farmer's research practices when developing communications plans for the district are thorough and she does an excellent job of identifying audiences, analyzing them and proactively developing lists of anticipated questions and answers that answer the mail when the district receives queries from public audiences and the media.

**PLANNING:** Lake Zorinsky Zebra Mussel communications efforts required close coordination with the project delivery team. The team brainstormed through the process and stages likely involved with the plan to drawdown the lake and refill it, trying to anticipate a realistic timeline and the needs of the community and the media during each stage of the process. The team also decided upon major themes for key messaging and talking point development, agreeing that the focus should be on: the Corps' role, safety and environmental stewardship.

Key to keeping the public and the media informed and providing them with a sense of ownership for the drawdown efforts were educational materials. The Corps adopted the State's "Clean,

Drain, Dry" slogan and used it in printed materials as well as on the district's Facebook page, where a special tab was created for the public specifically to keep them and the media updated on the Corps' progress at Lake Zorinsky.

Ms. Farmer contacted each public information officer at each agency involved with the effort and ensured collaboration of communications for news release and the release of other materials via the Web, including links to educational videos that explained the harm zebra mussels can cause and how to prevent them from entering a body of water. Working with the city of Omaha and the Nebraska Game, Fish and Parks, the Corps planned a Spring Clean Up event at the lake. The goal was to recruit members of the community to come out and volunteer to clean up the lake. Many items (i.e, tires, trash, etc.) were left behind after the drawdown.

**IMPLEMENTATION:** The primary source of communicating with the public was through thoroughly organized public meetings and the media. News releases were coordinated with the other agencies involved in the effort to rid the lake of zebra mussels. In addition, Ms. Farmer provided on-camera interview preparation to the Corps' subject matter experts on the project delivery team prior to pre-recorded and live interviews.

One particular effort she initiated to ensure the accuracy of article research and development by the Omaha World-Herald was a one-hour interview with the members of the Corps' project delivery team to better explain the science behind the Corps' decision to drawdown the lake as well as how and why it was believed that the drawdown of the lake would result in the control of the zebra mussel population in the lake.

**EVALUATION:** The Zorinsky Lake Spring Clean Event drew media from each of the four major news stations in Omaha, and the local newspaper. More than 400 citizens turned out to help with the cleanup and the highlight of the event, the Omaha District Commander presenting the Boy Scout who found the first zebra mussel with an Omaha District Commander's coin. The gesture was well-received by the crowd and the media. By mid-July, media coverage of the Lake Zorinsky Zebra Mussel efforts had fallen off the front page in Omaha, trumped by news coverage of the Missouri River Flood of 2011.

However, Omaha World-Herald reporter Nancy Gaarder, who has frequently worked with Ms. Farmer, wrote a positive article about the Corps efforts. In essence, the article declared the Corps victory in the fight against zebra mussels. While key messages and talking points communicated that the Corps' efforts to rid the lake of zebra mussels through the drawdown of the lake had resulted in no positive discoveries of the species in the lake following the drawdown, talking points were careful not to communicate overall victory due to the fact that zebra mussels can reoccur. The Corps' message was that we had been successful in controlling the population, which was conveyed in Ms. Gaarder's article.

Appendices B – F include news releases, articles, a social media screenshot and news coverage of the Corps' efforts in the fight against zebra mussels. Appendix D begins covering Lake Zorinsky at 40 seconds into the clip.

**Lake Sakakawea Water Supply Project**

**RESEARCH:** In May 2010, the Corps and the Omaha District saw negative news coverage in the North Dakota media due to a decision by the Corps headquarters that directed all Corps districts to begin requiring water supply contracts as opposed to real estate easements when allowing public and private entities to extract water from the Missouri River. This issue became specifically delicate at Lake Sakakawea in North Dakota due to the fact that private oil industries engage in oil fracking there. The issue gained immediate attention from senators and congressionals in the state.

Effective communication of the guidance provided by the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works (ASA(CW)) and USACE planned actions concerning 1) the availability and amount of surplus water at Lake Sakakawea, 2) the price associated with the use of the surplus water, both in the short and long-term, and 3) how irrigation users needed to be addressed in the communications plan. A surplus water report was completed at Garrison Dam/Lake Sakakawea, N.D. that identified surplus water, quantified a portion of that water to be available for surplus water contracts and provided a price for the use of the water, based on policy as outlined in current Engineering Regulations.

Public comment was obtained and incorporated into the report. On May 13, 2011, the ASA(CW) provided direction and guidance for the Corps regarding surplus water at Lake Sakakawea and appropriate pricing both in the short and long-term.

Research included interviews with the lead project manager, chief of planning and the operations manager at the Garrison Project Office to gain an understanding of the local political climate as it related to the issue. In addition, the policy memo from headquarters that directed the change and research into the oil fracking industry, the local economy as it related to oil fracking and alternative methods for retrieving and transporting oil.

Research also included a detailed analysis of each target audience.

**PLANNING:** Planning for the Lake Sakakawea Surplus Water Supply Report included outlining goals and objectives and developing command messages that aligned with the division's operations plan, communicated the command position and addressed issues that arose during the audience analysis. The development of the strategic communications plan also required working closely with the vertical team project delivery team.

The goals of the plan were identified by the team as such: a) to execute water supply or surplus water agreements in a manner that is consistent with the law and applicable Corps' regulations and policy b) to ensure Corps authorities and processes are clearly communicated to interested parties, by responding to public questions in a timely and consistent manner and c) to develop a comprehensive strategy at Lake Sakakawea (and other main stem reservoirs) for the long-term water supply needs within the Missouri River Basin.

In addition to proactively developing questions and answers likely to be posed by the media and specific target audiences, Ms. Farmer worked closely with the project manager, ensuring he

was prepared for print and on-camera interviews and understood how to properly insert and deliver key messages to the media.

**IMPLEMENTATION:** The project manager for the Lake Sakakawea Surplus Water Supply report was identified as the primary spokesperson. Ms. Farmer facilitated print interviews with media in North Dakota, preparing the project manager with both print, pre-recorded radio and on-camera interview preparation to ensure message and talking point accuracy and to help the project manager brush up on media training techniques.

Questions were tracked and evaluated following the interviews, and the project manager was critiqued to help strengthen his preparation for future interviews.

**EVALUATION:** Intermediate evaluation of the messages, talking points and communications tools used to communicate the Corps' role and provide regular updates to the media and the public has helped the project delivery team determine where and when to refine messages. News coverage shifted from negative to neutral in regards to communicating the Corps role and the process involved with completing the surplus water report.

To date, the Assistant Secretary of the Army has not reached a decision on the project. However, the communications plan includes a tentative rollout plan for announcing the decision, including making use of the Web and social media to reach target audiences.

Appendices G and H provide an example news release and article related to the project.

MISSOURI RIVER FLOODING

# The worst is yet to come

## Army Corps of Engineers official foresees 'a lot of pain and suffering'

By David Hendee
*World-Herald Staff Writer*

Imagine roughly 55 million acres — the entire surface of Nebraska and southwest Iowa — covered in a foot of water.

Now imagine trying to funnel all that water down a drainage canal surrounded by airports and homes, businesses and farms.

You can begin to grasp the unprecedented, slow-developing danger facing folks from Montana to Missouri from the Great Flood of 2011.

In more than a century of record-keeping, the nation's longest river has never coped with more water.

Floodwaters are breaching levees, triggering evacuations, closing highways, swamping thousands of acres of farmland, destroying homes and lapping against hurriedly reinforced floodwalls protecting cities, airports and power plants, including two in Nebraska that produce nuclear power.

The damage bill will tally in the hundreds of millions.

As bad as it's been, the hardest parts are still ahead, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the river system's managers.

"It's going to be a devastating season in terms of how the levees do," said Brig. Gen. John McMahon, commander of the corps' Northwestern Division. "There's going to be a lot of pain and suffering."

Frustration and questions along the river are rising, too. Elected officials, including the governors of Nebraska and Iowa, have criticized or called for investigations of the management of the Missouri by the corps.

"I think when this is over there needs to be a complete review of how the whole Missouri River basin has been handled by the corps," said Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad.

Last Sunday, leaders of the corps sat down with The World-Herald to explain their decisions and address public concerns.

**ONLY IN THE WORLD-HERALD**

They argued there was no way to predict the historically large late-May rainfall that drenched vast swaths of the semi-arid northern Plains and poured millions of acre-feet of water into the basin's reservoirs, filling space the corps says it had allocated for melting snow.

The corps manages six major dams on the main stem of the upper Missouri from Montana to Nebraska — home to the largest system of reservoirs in the United States. Garrison Dam in North Dakota, Oahe Dam in South Dakota and Fort Peck Dam in Montana are the nation's largest corps-operated dams.

Above Gavins Point, the Missouri River drains nearly 280,000 square miles from five states, a region bigger than Texas.

On June 23, the corps increased releases at Gavins Point to a record 160,000 cubic feet per second. At that rate, 1 million acre-feet passes through the dam's floodgates every three days.

The corps expects peak releases to extend well into August.

"This really is a historic flood," said Jody Farhat, the corps' Omaha-based water management chief. "It's unprecedented in our history of the hydrologic records of the Missouri River basin."

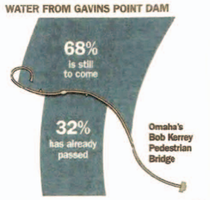
An astounding 195,000 cubic feet of water per second is expected to flow past Omaha today. Visualize the volume of water this way: Every second, 195,000 basketballs are cascading downstream.

For a more detailed account of the question-and-answer session with the corps, turn to Page 6A.

Contact the writer:
402-444-1127, david.hendee@owh.com

**"This really is a historic flood. It's unprecedented in our history."**

*Jody Farhat, Army Corps of Engineers*




**CONTINUING COVERAGE**

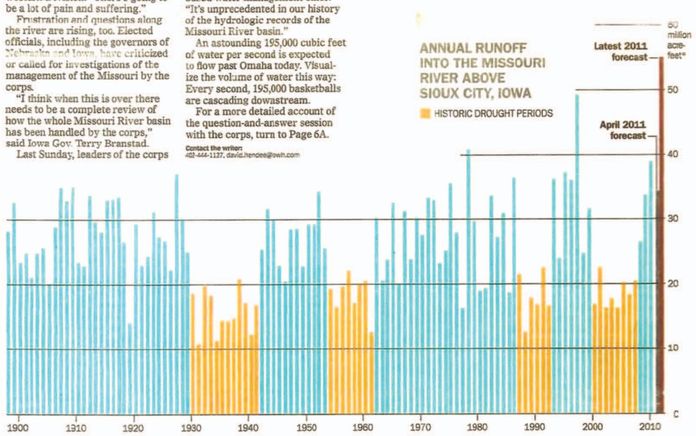
**FLOODING CONCERNS:** Heavy rain in some parts of Omaha tested the city's flood control efforts. **MIDLANDS**

**DEVELOPMENTS:** The latest flooding updates from Nebraska and Iowa. **MIDLANDS, PAGE 4B**

**WHAT'S NEXT?** Check our weather forecast and Missouri River stages. **MIDLANDS, PAGE 10B**

**ON OMAHA.COM/FLOODMAP:** An interactive county-by-county map of flooding along the Missouri River

**PHOTO SHOWCASES:** Find hundreds of photographs on the Missouri Flooding page on **OMAHA.COM**




*An acre-foot is enough to cover one acre of land with a foot of water. One million acre-feet would cover Douglas, Sarpy and Pottawattamie Counties in a foot of water.

DAVE CROY/THE WORLD-HERALD

## HOW DID WE GET HERE? WHAT'S THE PLAN? EXPLAINING THE FLOOD OF 2011

A summary of conditions and flood-prevention tactics, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers:

1 The full flood control capacity of the six reservoirs on the main stem of the Missouri River was available at the start of this year's runoff season.

» 2010 was the third-highest runoff year on record.

» All 2010 floodwater was cleared from the reservoirs before the start of this year's runoff.

2 Until abnormally heavy May rains fell in the northern Plains, reservoir water did not need to be released at a historic pace.

**APRIL 1 FORECASTS** *Runoff:* 33.8 million acre-feet. *Gavins Point Dam peak releases:* 39,000 cubic feet per second to 45,000 cfs, within the normal range.

**MAY 1 FORECASTS** *Runoff:* 44 million acre-feet. *Gavins Point Dam peak releases:* 57,500 cfs — a wet year pace, but not historic.

**JUNE 1 FORECASTS** *Runoff:* 54.6 million acre-feet. Gavins Point Dam peak releases: 150,000 cfs (now 160,000 cfs), more than double the record high releases.

3 To evacuate all of the stored floodwater, high releases will continue through August.

» The goal is to evacuate reservoirs to provide time for damage assessment and flood-protection system repairs prior to next year's runoff season.

# May rains were 'real kicker' in big water year

BY DAVID HENDEE AND NANCY GAARDER | WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITERS

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers manages the surging Missouri River — including six large reservoirs in Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota and Nebraska — all swollen with water from historic rainfall and snowmelt. • The World-Herald met recently with top Corps of Engineers officials to discuss the conditions and decisions behind flooding in the Missouri River basin. • The meeting at the corps' Omaha District headquarters downtown included Brig. Gen. John McMahon, commander of the Northwestern Division, based in Portland, Ore.; Col. Robert Ruch, commander of the Omaha District; Jody Farhat, who regulates the dams as chief of the district's water management division; John Bertino Jr., the district engineering chief who oversees dam safety; John Remus, district hydrologic engineering chief; and Kimberly Thomas, district emergency and disaster chief. • Here is an abridged account, in question-and-answer form. Remarks were edited for clarity.


**Q. How much space is devoted to the reservoir system for floods?**

**Farhat:** The system has 16.3 million acre-feet of storage reserved for floods. It's always had about that number. They sized that to handle a very large flood, the historic flood of 1881.

**Q. Is that enough?**

**Farhat:** Throughout the historic record, from that time until today — and we have good hydrologic records going back to 1898 — that 16.3 million acre-feet of flood-control storage was sufficient to handle the big runoff years every year without having to make releases that are outside the channel capacity. This is the first time we've ever had to make releases that create downstream flooding.

**Q. How much water is coming this way?**

**Farhat:** This year we're estimating that we'll have 54.6 million acre-feet of runoff. More than twice the normal runoff. Our previous record was 49 million acre-feet. So more than 10 percent above our previous record, which was in 1997.

This really is a historic flood event. It's something that is unprecedented in our history of the hydrologic records of the Missouri River basin.

**McMahon:** That is a forecast, and it will change as the year goes on.

**Farhat:** Most likely it will go up, because our June runoff is tracking higher than we had forecast.

**Q. What's normal?**

**Farhat:** We've spent very little time in the last 20 years in what we would like to say is our normal 24.8 million acre-feet of runoff. We've either been very wet or very dry.

**Q. What happened to mountain snowpack this year?**

**Farhat:** Up until mid-April, it was tracking just a little bit above normal — 110 percent to 115 percent of normal.

Then it simply skyrocketed.

We expect mountain snowpack to peak in mid-April. So even as it started to diverge, it wasn't a real concern, because any day now it should start going down. But instead it just skyrocketed and it peaked in early May at 135 percent to 140 percent of normal.

But even then we were in good shape with the reservoir system. We ran our May 1 runoff forecast. We knew it was going to be an abundant water year. We were going to have above-normal releases. We would be in flood evacuation mode all year. But we still had nothing to tell us we were going to need record releases from any of the dams at that point.

So here we sat on the first of May, still in good shape. Big water year, but nowhere even near a record water year. Our forecast was about 44 million acre-feet.

**Q. What changed?**

**Farhat:** This was the real kicker. About the second weekend in May, we got two or three inches of rain in eastern Montana. We had a good rise on the Yellowstone River. Again, still manageable.

We were going to have to increase our releases from Garrison Dam and the dams downstream. But the weekend of May 20 to 22, much of the eastern half of Montana got 5 to 8 inches of rain.

Down here we can get 5 or 8 inches of rain. It happens once in a while over a small area. A county or a community gets a heavy rainstorm. But this was over the whole eastern half of Montana. A tremendous volume of water came in. Then it was followed by more rain in the following weeks into June.

As a result, we had a tremendous volume of water come into the reservoir system. We're estimating that this rainfall event was between 4 million and 5 million acre-feet of runoff — and it used up all the storage that we had remaining into the reservoirs that we were planning to use for the snow.

So now we're full.

**Q. The winter snowpack runoff wouldn't exceed 4 million to 5 million acre-feet?**

**Farhat:** The volume would have, but we would have releases at the same time. We had enough storage to manage that runoff. It usually takes two and a half months to get the snow out.

**Q. Tell us more about the May 22 rains. It seemed that you were increasing the Gavins Point Dam releases daily that week.**

**Farhat:** It took a couple of days to really get a good handle on the volumes that we were going to be looking at and also the potential timing for that snowmelt, because we were already late into the season. We were concerned it would melt off rapidly, so we ran different scenarios of our snowmelt and, of course, with additional rain in the forecast as well.

We thought we would be right at 110,000 cubic feet per second to 120,000 cfs from Gavins Point. That following weekend, they forecast three or four inches more rain over this same saturated area. We knew at that point that those releases would have to go up.

During that period we had some of the highest storage gains in the reservoirs. Over 400,000 acre-feet a day. I worked here a long time before I ever saw a storage change of 100,000 acre-feet a day.

It was just an unbelievable amount of water coming into the reservoir.

**McMahon:** So it might have looked like we weren't on our game, but we're monitoring it closely, making adjustments on the best available information and not wanting to incite panic, because now we were edging up into historic releases.

It looked like what it looked like, but it was the best we could do under the circumstances.

Each one of those bumps up of releases were "Oh, my God," because we hadn't been there before. Oh, my God, 100,000. Oh, my God, 120,000. Oh, my God, 150,000.

**Q. A lot of people wonder why you didn't start releasing in April when you saw the snowpack rise.**

**Farhat:** On the 28th of January we had all of the flood-control capacity available.

The fact that 2010 was a big runoff year didn't reduce our ability to provide flood control this year because we had evacuated all of last year's water. The full flood-control capacity was available.

**Q. With the Mississippi River flooding earlier in the spring, was there any thought given or any attempt to hold water back on the Missouri so that we didn't add to the problems below St. Louis?**

**McMahon:** The short answer is yes, there was some consideration given, but . . .

**Farhat:** But the answer is no. We are not authorized to operate solely for the Mississippi River basin. We provide them a forecast of what we think the flows are going to be on the lower end of the Missouri River, but we did not make any decisions this year for the benefit of the Mississippi River.

**Q. What were the projected Gavins Point releases looking like in April and May?**

**Farhat:** Our April 1 study showed that we were expecting peak releases from Gavins Point this year to be between 39,000 and 45,000 cfs. Very much in the normal range. We were watching the mountain snowpack. We were watching the Plains snowpack. Some of it had already come into the reservoir system, and we're still talking very normal releases.

We had no reason to evacuate. There was nothing telling us (we were) getting record rainfall in May. If that record rainfall didn't fall in May, we would be on a release somewhere around 50,000 to 60,000 cfs.

**McMahon:** We have to have good reasons to bump the release. We just can't do it on a whim. It's transparent. Everybody sees it. We've got to have good, hard reasons for doing these things. We didn't have it until we had it, and then we started bumping them up.

**Ruch:** Every one of those (authorized) uses has a constituency attached to it. So if you start going outside your parameters without a very sound reason, you will hear from people immediately. We get regulated a lot of ways here.

**Farhat:** The other important thing is that we watch Gavins Point releases. But the water doesn't come from Gavins Point Dam. The water comes from the upper three dams.

So you have to be able to release the water from Montana and North Dakota and South Dakota. In the winter, until the middle of March, those stretches of the river are frozen, and if we were to increase releases at that time, we would cause tremendous ice jam flooding. We're very restricted on what our releases can be in the winter.

The key thing here is we didn't have a reason to increase releases. Our studies showed that we would have releases within the normal leve. We didn't have a crystal ball that said, "Watch out, the rain is coming."

**Q. If it had been a normal May in Montana, how would this year compare with last year?**

**Farhat:** We were predicting on the first of May we were going to have about 44 million acre-feet of runoff. That would have been our second-highest year on record. So it was going to be a wet year.

**Q. So it was already going to be worse than last year?**

**Farhat:** Yeah. What made last year bad was not the releases from Gavins Point. It was the inflows (into the Missouri) from all the rain below the dam, coupled with our releases. We had a lot of rain fall below Gavins. We can't control that.

**McMahon:** So last year we adjusted releases from the main stem downward to allow that rain to move through the system. Even with those adjustments, it still inundated many farms and put levees in jeopardy, it overtopped and breached some levees that have since been repaired.

We were sensitive to learn from what happened last year and try to avoid it (this year), to the extent you can. But, on the other hand, when water manifests itself in the system and you need to begin to evacuate it, you need to evacuate it because that's the responsibility we have.

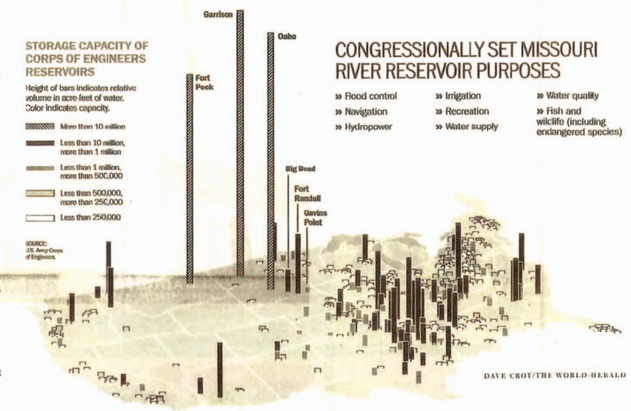
**Farhat:** In April and early May this year, we were getting flooding from rain between the reservoirs, rain in the upper basin.

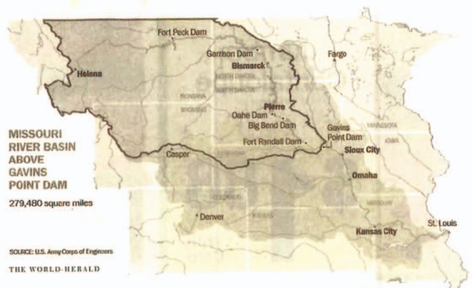
My office received many, many phone calls from folks who live below Gavins Point Dam saying we should cut back our releases. They felt that the river was already high and was beginning to interfere with drainage. They would have liked to see lower releases. We get a lot of advice, I'll just say that.

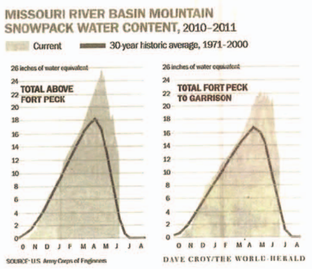
**Q. Did the lesson from last year, when you cut back releases because you were worried about rain and flooding below Gavins Point, influence this year's releases?**

**McMahon:** No. It did not influence the schedule that

*See Q&A: Page 7*




# Q&A: Endangered species 'had no impact' on plans

*Continued from Page 6*

developed as the rain developed.

**Farhat:** We're just sensitive to the concerns.

I think the question goes back to why didn't we release a lot more water. The reason is because we have to balance both upstream and downstream.

We know the folks downstream do not want us to release more water than we have to. Neither do the people upstream. So we're always walking that fine line between the upstream and downstream interests, and we really try to base our releases on studies that look at the volume of water coming in and tell us what we need to do to manage that water from now until the start of next year's runoff season.

**Q. Sometimes people get gut feelings about these massive events, or have historical knowledge that doesn't feed into a computer. Can you say this is what the study says, but this is what we're going to do?**

**Ruch:** It's never a gut feeling. It's got to be backed up by numbers.

**Q. But can you say this is what the data says, but we're going to do something different?**

**Farhat:** We want to make our decisions on the best real information that we have.

We have to be sensitive about how quickly conditions can change in this basin. We went to public meetings in April in Montana, North Dakota and South Dakota and people stood up and said be careful not to release too much water. We could return to a drought at any moment. This was in April, just a month before the rains started. Folks are very sensitive to us dumping what they see as their water unnecessarily.

We're managing for all those authorized purposes. We try to base it on good, solid info, not on hunches.

**Q. Some people say that managing river flows for barge traffic or the pallid sturgeon and other endangered species takes your eye off your flood-control mission.**

**Farhat:** The endangered species had no impact on this year's regulation at all. It does not have impact in any year on flood control. No decisions this year were made based on operating for terns and plovers or the pallid sturgeon.

**Q. Has there been any consideration to flooding one place to avoid a more populated place?**

**McMahon:** We don't have that flexibility. There's so much water in the system that everybody's going to be flooded. When you fly over it, it's bluff to bluff. The historic flood pain has water in it.

**Q. So there is no parallel to the decisions made on the Mississippi to blow a levee?**

**Ruch:** Could we flow the water around Omaha and Council Bluffs? Upstream from Omaha, the water is bluff to bluff. There is no channel there. The space doesn't exist even if you wanted to plan it.

**Q. Are we in uncharted territory, wondering if a levee holds or whatever else happens?**

**Bertino:** We're hitting peak river stages on a number of our gauges. The height and the duration of this flood is unprecedented. We haven't been here before.

**McMahon:** You have levees here that are sand core, clay blankets. The way I see it is we have lots of vulnerabilities. I think we're going to have a lot of overtopped or breached levees.

The big cities, Omaha, Kansas City, Council Bluffs, I think are OK. I'm not anticipating any issues in the big cities' levee systems.

But we're going to have overtops (and) breaches continue through August and later.

It's going to be a devastating season in terms of how the levees do.

Then we'll have to go back once the water subsides and inspect, make repairs, a whole bunch of things before next season.

**Ruch:** We did about $20 million worth of levee repairs after a lot less floodwater last year. We're going to have an incredible amount of work to try to get the system back in shape for next year.

**McMahon:** There's going to be a lot of pain and suffering continuing. I don't think we've seen nearly as much as there's going to be all the way down the system.

**Q. Is it a big fear that you won't get the levees repaired for next year?**

**Ruch:** There's a lot of work to be done in getting ready for next flood season. It will be an incredible amount of work.

**Q. Do we need to be concerned about the integrity of the dams?**

**McMahon:** No.

**Bertino:** We have a very, very aggressive dam safety program. All the surveillance we're doing indicates they are performing the way they were designed to. We don't see anything that concerns us.

**Q. What do people who live behind levees need to know about their own personal preparedness?**

**McMahon:** They need to be tuned in to local officials and take very seriously all the warnings, evacuation plans and precautions. A levee doesn't necessarily guarantee protection. It's a risk-reduction measure. There's still risk. We Americans unfortunately are very complacent about the risk associated with living in the flood plain and living behind levees.

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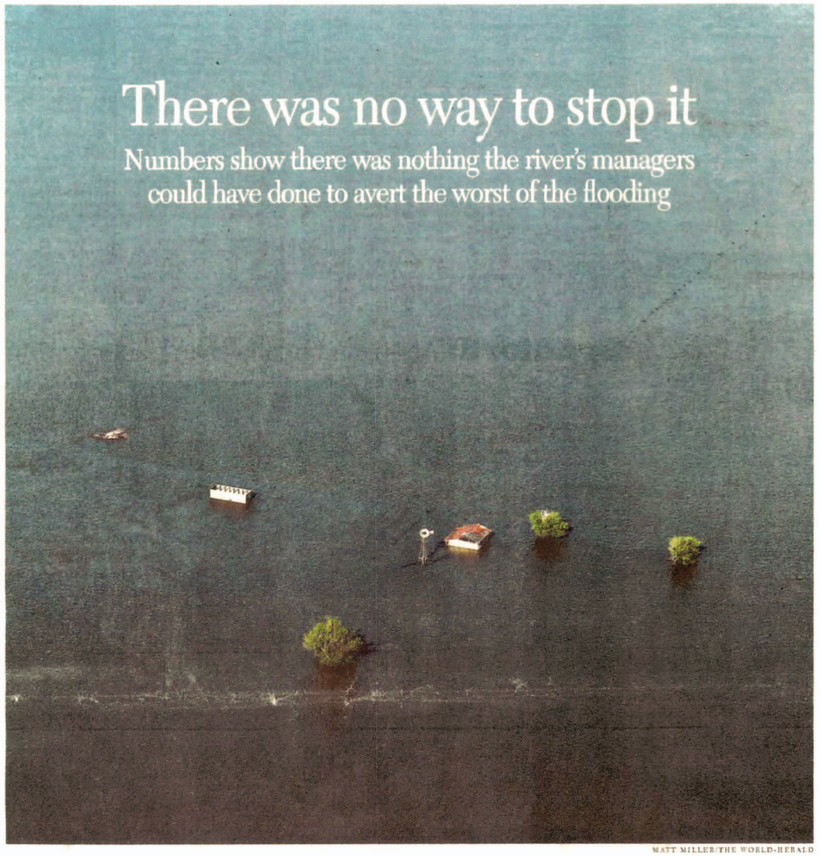
# There was no way to stop it

## Numbers show there was nothing the river's managers could have done to avert the worst of the flooding



MATT MILLER/THE WORLD-HERALD

BY DAVID HENDEE | ONLY IN THE WORLD-HERALD

Looking back, there were no good choices, and all would have ended in massive flooding.

Faced with rain and runoff unmatched in recorded history, the Army Corps of Engineers opened its big dams on the Missouri River and unleashed an unprecedented flood on cities and farms along nearly 1,400 miles of the nation's longest river.

There was nothing the river's Omaha-based managers could have done to avert the worst of this summer's flooding. The volume of water was simply too much to handle. That's the inescapable conclusion of a World-Herald examination of corps data, studies and internal emails, as well as interviews with corps officials, leading corps critics and outside experts in climatology and hydrology.

Even if federal engineers had somehow known months in advance about the unprecedented deluge and drained its biggest reservoirs at record-matching rates, the end result would have been much the same: historic flooding from North Dakota to Missouri and billions of dollars in damage to homes, farms, businesses and highways.

See Corps: Page 10

**CONTINUING COVERAGE**


» The intense rainfall in the Northern Plains vs. Hurricane Irene. **Page 10A**

» As bad as the flooding turned out, it could have been worse. **Page 11A**

» Read previous stories on the Flood of 2011 and see photo showcases. **On Omaha.com**


# Corps: 'The amount of water in the river system was truly astounding'

*Continued from Page 1*

From state capitols to Capitol Hill, questions about the corps' operation of the river continue to fuel investigations, hearings and studies. U.S. Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, has written a bill that would require the corps to keep water levels in reservoirs low enough to accommodate a flood year like this one.

But in the end, while some work around the margins could've been handled differently, 2011 was an impossible year to corral a river trying to take back its wild, natural path.

The reason for the Flood of 2011 still boils down to math.

The corps' six-dam system in Montana and the Dakotas is designed to accommodate 40 million acre-feet of rainfall and runoff from March through July. This year's total exceeded that capacity by 20 percent. It was the largest runoff in Missouri River records that date to 1881.

The reservoir system would have to be permanently lowered to levels seen only in drought years to accommodate flows similar to those in 2011.

"People need to understand the numbers," said Dennis Todey, a state climatologist based at South Dakota State University. "The amount of water in the river system was truly astounding."

Todey said the corps manages the reservoirs for as many variables as possible.

"But you can't account for every extreme circumstance," he said. "The fairly wet winter could have been managed. The widespread, heavy rainfall in Montana put it over the top."

Indeed, Montana received a year's worth of rain in a matter of weeks. Isolated areas were drenched by storms expected once in 1,000 years. The volume and intensity rivaled Hurricane Irene's raucous three-day sweep up the nation's Eastern Seaboard. Damaging as it was, Irene's deluge flowed out into the Atlantic Ocean. The Montana deluge had to surge down the straw that is the Missouri.

Few people scrutinize corps actions as closely as Bill Lay of Fayette, Mo., an 82-year-old retired attorney who owns a family farm along the river.

Lay is a member of the politically vocal Missouri Levee and Drainage District Association, an advocate for flood control and a frequent corps critic.

He has a reputation in the corps' Omaha District headquarters for reading every river report, study and manual front to back. He attends meetings and frequently calls or writes with advice and observations.

When the Missouri floods, Lay's farmland gets wet. During the historic flood of 1993, water from the river bubbled into Lay's fields like artesian wells flooding his crops. This year was worse. Lay's levee-protected farmland lost three-fourths of his corn and soybeans.

But this time, Lay says he can't criticize the corps, because it had no good options.

"You can't handle a big flood like that with a tea cup," he said. "They just didn't have the storage space to do it. I think they did a pretty good job.

"I hate to admit it, but even if they let the water out (early), we'd still have a flooding problem because of the amount of water we had up there."

Terry Fleck, who is chairman of the Friends of Sakakawea, an organization that advocates for the Lake Sakakawea reservoir, moved his family out of their Bismarck, N.D., home as a precaution against flooding.

He remains critical of the corps for not providing louder warnings in April about the high probability of flooding.

"It would have given everyone a little more time to plan," he said. "But how much difference would it have made?

"Probably none."

Many corps critics forget, he said, that the dams did their job.

"They held," he said, protecting communities like Bismarck, Omaha and St. Louis from more devastating damage.

Without the dams, the river's peak stage would have been 5.2 feet higher in Bismarck and 3.2 feet higher in Sioux City, Iowa, according to a corps study.

In Omaha, the river would have been 3.8 feet higher — or within one foot of the top of the downtown flood wall.

Some say the flood surprised the corps because it blindly followed its 432-page Master Manual in managing the river. Jody Farhat, a civilian corps engineer who manages the nation's largest reservoir system from her Omaha office, disagreed.

"We have the ability to deviate from the manual for unusual and unforeseen circumstances," she said. "The manual is not prescriptive."

Lay's lone criticism is that the corps didn't release more water in April, when early snowmelt filled more than half of the reservoir space available for the annual spring runoff. "But if they had," he said, "I would have complained because I didn't want the water down here."

* * *

Farhat has heard the question countless times: Why didn't the corps release water sooner?

Her answer: Early reservoir levels and snowpack depths were within manageable levels.

From January through March, the reservoirs were at about the mid-range of their historic elevations. April ranked 10th in water stored. May ranked fifth.

Preliminary corps studies examined the possible impact of higher reservoir releases starting in January on peak flows from Gavins Point, 195 miles upriver from Omaha.

The studies assumed the impossible: perfect knowledge of the record rainstorms to come. Even with such foresight and early releases, the region would have faced significant flooding.

The releases would have had to come from the upper three reservoirs that hold 88 percent of the system's water. They also would have increased the risk of flooding across the Dakotas because of ice jams, Farhat said. The Missouri was frozen near Bismarck until March 20.

Higher releases earlier also would have worsened flooding below Gavins Point in March and April, she said, because downstream tributaries were carrying water from Plains snowpack and local rainfall.

The peak summer release rate still would have been 130,000 cfs, nearly twice the former record and just 30,000 cfs shy of this year's eventual high.

"Certainly, yes, some people would have been saved by doing that," Farhat said of earlier water releases. "Had we had that perfect foresight ... it would have reduced the flows. But it wouldn't have brought it down to the level that it didn't cause damage — and flooding would still have been bluff to bluff."

Indeed, the big breach in the levee protecting Hamburg, Iowa, came June 13, when releases at Gavins Point were 108,000 cfs.

Farhat said the corps increased Gavins Point flows in late March, at a time when reservoir-storage totals and runoff forecasts indicated less water should have been released.

She quickly heard from people questioning why flows were above flood stage from the Platte River in Nebraska south to Kansas City, Mo. They suggested water should be conserved.

Farhat replied that mountain and Plains snowpack indicated a likely wet year, and it was better to let a bit more water down into the drier lower Missouri basin before floodplain farmers returned to their fields in May.

"So it's this balancing between what we know we have, what we know is coming and managing the downstream flows," Farhat said. "We still had room in the reservoir system, and we had high flows downstream.

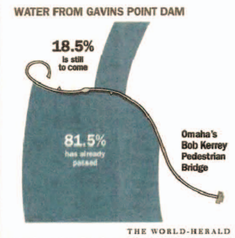
"We felt like we were very much in control."

* * *

By April 1, corps officials were polishing up a forecast that called for one of the basin's wettest years. Persistently high stream flows were expected across the reservoir system, and spring runoff already was filling space in the reservoirs reserved exclusively for flood control.

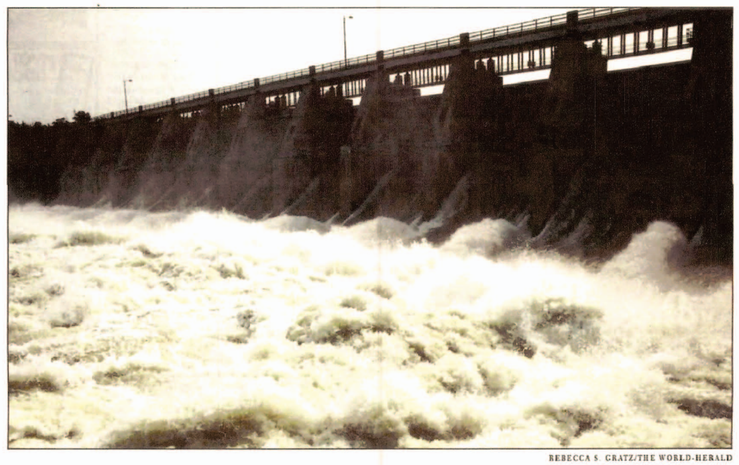
Two corps colleagues provided Farhat with a draft calling for a major — but not record-setting — runoff. They noted that snowpack covering 35,000 square miles of the Northern Plains held up to 4.5 inches of water over an area that drains into North Dakota's Garrison Reservoir.

JAMES R. BURNETT/THE WORLD-HERALD




THE WORLD-HERALD

**At left, anglers fish downstream from Gavins Point dam last week. Below is the dam on June 7. Releases from the dam on the Nebraska and South Dakota border are now at 40,000 cubic feet per second. Peak releases during the summer flood were 160,000 cfs.**



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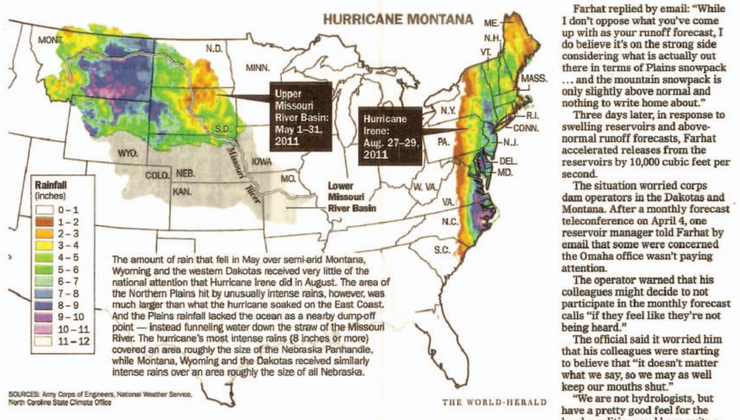


THE WORLD-HERALD

# Corps: Conditions changed almost daily

*Continued from Page 10*

release their water downstream. They warned that drought could return at any time — and that as much water as possible should be held back in the reservoirs.

During that trip, Farhat learned that mountain snowpack in Montana and Wyoming was accumulating quickly. She soon increased releases from Garrison Dam to make room.

Her action grabbed attention across the basin.

Farhat

John Drew, a Missouri Natural Resources Department official, called the corps April 18 and asked why river flows were above previous targets. A Farhat colleague took the call.

"He (Drew) was wondering why we were not cutting back," the colleague emailed Farhat.

The next day, the same colleague received a call from Kelly Casteel in North Dakota's state water office.

Casteel was concerned about Garrison's relatively high elevation and wondered why the corps wasn't releasing more water.

On April 21, Nancy Neurohr wrote Farhat's office that the Missouri was flooding her Riverland campground and Tyson's Bend north of Blair, Neb.

"Just spent thousands of dollars cleaning up last year's mess," she said in an email. "Looks like recreation on the Missouri for us & everyone south is out again this year. Sorry, but this is very frustrating (not to mention expensive) for a lot of us."

Farhat said such concerns are typical of daily scrutiny corps actions receive — and of the tightrope the corp must walk.

"We have the upper and lower basin asking us to do opposite things ... and everybody's watching," she said.

* * *

The fast-changing conditions created by Montana rains in May astounded corps engineers.

June runoff set a record as the basin's wettest month in 113 years of records. May was the third-wettest month. July was fifth.

Farhat visited Bismarck on May 27 to view the area's sandbagging preparations. Gen. John McMahon, commander of the corps' Northwest Division, and Col. Robert Ruch, commander of the Omaha District, led the delegation. It was a Friday.

Four days earlier, the corps had alerted the public that repeated rounds of heavy rain across Montana and the Dakotas had pushed reservoirs to levels that called for aggressive water releases.

The corps then said high flows had thrust the Missouri into uncharted territory. "There is no good news," Farhat said at the time. She said Gavins Point releases would probably reach 75,000 cfs in a week and as high was 85,000 by early June.

The nearly daily changes were frustrating, Farhat said.

"We were trying to let people know, (and) the truth was changing underneath us," she said.

That Friday in the Dakotas, the corps delegation said flows out of Garrison should peak at 105,000 cfs in mid-June. For the end of June, Gavins Point releases were projected at 110,000 cfs.

Later that afternoon, Farhat's cellphone rang as she walked into the Bismarck airport.

Corps engineers Kevin Grode and Mike Swenson in Omaha had new information.

"They said, 'My God, you should see the precipitation forecast,'" Farhat said.

Grode and Swenson told Farhat that the National Weather Service was predicting another 2 to 3 inches would fall over already saturated Montana.

Farhat turned to McMahon. "I told the general, "The number's going to go up.'"

The group returned to Omaha and worked into the early morning hours, revising the corps' flood projections.

It was a critical moment.

Communities along the river were designing and building flood-protection barriers based on corps projections that changed almost daily that week as stream gauges across Montana, Wyoming and North Dakota registered the incoming flood.

"We knew that the new number we gave in the morning couldn't change," Farhat said. "Those towns needed to know that what we told them would stick."

The engineers reviewed how much snowpack remained. They factored in rainfall. They calculated the worst-possible snowmelt pattern. Then they increased the anticipated water volume by 10 percent.

"Essentially, we wanted to know how bad it could be," Farhat said.

They determined that the dams by mid-June would have to release a record 150,000 cfs. More rain during the summer pushed releases to 160,000.

Farhat had a simple hope that volatile week. She needed time to rid the reservoirs of runoff from the previous weekend's storms.

An eastern Montana rainstorm that Memorial Day weekend "took away that hope."

The Flood of 2011 was under way.

**Contact the writer:**
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**'SUFFICIENT EVERY YEAR'**

From January through March this year, the six federal reservoirs on the Missouri River held about 57 million acre-feet of water.

They were at levels to absorb all of the melted snow and rain historically known to funnel into the Missouri, including the above-average snowpack that continued to pile up in the mountains of Montana and Wyoming.

"It has been sufficient every year," said Jody Farhat, the Army Corps of Engineers water chief in Omaha. "We were not ... concerned about our ability to capture this year's runoff. That's really what we believed."

— David Hendee

Farhat replied by email: "While I don't oppose what you've come up with as your runoff forecast, I do believe it's on the strong side considering what is actually out there in terms of Plains snowpack ... and the mountain snowpack is only slightly above normal and nothing to write home about."

Three days later, in response to swelling reservoirs and above-normal runoff forecasts, Farhat accelerated releases from the reservoirs by 10,000 cubic feet per second.

The situation worried corps dam operators in the Dakotas and Montana. After a monthly forecast teleconference on April 4, one reservoir manager told Farhat by email that some were concerned the Omaha office wasn't paying attention.

The operator warned that his colleagues might decide to not participate in the monthly forecast calls "if they feel like they're not being heard."

The official said it worried him that his colleagues were starting to believe that "it doesn't matter what we say, so we may as well keep our mouths shut."

"We are not hydrologists, but have a pretty good feel for the local conditions and have quite a bit of experience in dealing with the reservoirs," wrote the official, whose name was redacted in emails obtained in a public records request.

Farhat said in a follow-up interview with The World-Herald that snowpack conditions upstream from each reservoir are pieces of a larger puzzle. She acknowledged that some areas of the Plains had heavy snow last spring but said others had less than the previous year.

"We take in the big picture," she said. "We monitor the snowpack across the Plains and mountains, and we account for it every month in our forecasts."

The corps' April forecast was sobering. Public projections indicated 2011 could be the second-wettest year on record, based on the amount of water released from Gavins Point. Releases of 60,000 cubic feet per second were predicted. The record of 70,000 cfs was set in the snowpack-fed flood of 1997.

* * *

The corps hosts public meetings across the basin each April to let people know how it plans to operate the reservoir system, based on the latest available snowpack statistics.

In the Dakotas this year, people stood and cautioned Farhat not to

*See Corps: Page 11*

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U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

# NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release: March 17, 2011

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## Zorinsky Lake Community Spring Clean-Up set for May 7

Omaha, Neb. – The public is invited to participate in a spring clean-up event at Zorinsky Lake May 7.

The Zorinsky Lake Community Spring Clean-Up will enable the greater Omaha community to assist in clearing debris and trash from around the lake in preparation for the refilling of the reservoir, tentatively scheduled to take place in the fall. The subsequent rebuilding of the fishery will follow.

Beginning in late December, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began lowering Zorinsky Lake to 1092 feet msl in accordance with a multi-agency recommended plan of action to control zebra mussels. Any mussels exposed to the air were subject to drying out and or freezing, which is lethal. The environmental assessment of the plan determined there would be no significant long-term impact to the environment from this action.

The Zorinsky Lake Community Spring Clean-Up is a family friendly event hosted by the City of Omaha and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and will begin at 8 a.m. with a free breakfast, courtesy of HyVee. Volunteers will meet at the boat ramp at 156th and F Streets.

Informational booths on zebra mussels will be on display. Representatives of the various agencies participating in the effort to control the invasive species will also be on hand to field questions from the public.

The actual cleanup will run from 9 to 11 a.m. and all necessary cleanup equipment will be provided.

Survey work continues on Zorinsky Lake as the multi-agency team determines to what depth adult zebra mussels inhabited the reservoir.

As the lake remains drawn down, it is important for recreationists, fishermen and others who use Zorinsky Lake for recreation to stay off the lake bed and out of the lake in the interest of public safety.

**-more-**

“Safety is the number one priority of the multi-agency task force,” said Jolene Hulsing of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. “With the lake being lowered, there is currently a lot of mud surrounding the water that is remaining.”

The City of Omaha has restricted access to the lake and lake bed, itself. Signs warning the public of the lake’s closure have been posted at multiple locations throughout the park. Recreationists continue to have access to the trails, playground and ball fields.

Zebra mussels are an invasive species that can multiply exponentially and have adverse ecological impacts such as out-competing fish for food supply in lakes, attaching to boats and covering everything in sight. The invasive species can also clog water intakes and pipes, said Karie Decker, Invasive Species Project Coordinator with the Nebraska Invasive Species Project, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

David Tunink of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission said the commission will begin restocking the lake with fish in fall 2011 with largemouth bass, walleye, black crappie, bluegill, muskellunge, and channel catfish. The restocked lake will provide high quality recreational fishing opportunities and will contribute to a healthy lake ecosystem.

Zorinsky Lake is owned by the Corps of Engineers and leased to the City of Omaha, who manages the lake and recreational facilities.

For questions regarding the the Zorinsky Lake Community Spring Clean-Up, please contact Amber Miller with the City of Omaha Parks and Recreation Office at (402) 444-5947.

For more information about zebra mussels and how you can assist in the effort to protect Nebraska’s bodies of water, please visit:

- http://www.100thmeridian.org/ - For boaters, anglers, and aquatic recreational users
- http://snr.unl.edu/invasives/ - Nebraska Invasive Species Project
- http://www.anstaskforce.gov/ - Aquatic Nuisance Species (ANS) Task Force

Also, visit the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District, on Facebook or Twitter to stay updated on the progress of efforts to control the zebra mussels: www.facebook.com/OmahaUSACE or www.twitter.com/OmahaUSACE.

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# NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release: May 13, 2011

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## Community responds with Spring Cleanup Event

**Omaha, Neb.** – The multi-agency task force addressing zebra mussels at Zorinsky Lake would like to thank the greater Omaha community for its overwhelming response to the Community Spring Cleanup held May 7.

The cleaning of the lake is one step toward preparing to refill it beginning in either the late summer or fall. The lake was lowered in late December to expose an invasive species, zebra mussels, to freezing temperatures and thereby kill them. The zebra mussels were first discovered in November by a Boy Scout cleaning trash from around Zorinsky Lake.

As many as 800 volunteers showed up to clean the lakebed and shoreline of the reservoir, according to estimates from the City of Omaha Parks and Recreation Department.

In all, more than 2,000 trash bags were used by volunteers to gather debris and junk that in turn filled two 20-yard dumpsters to the brim. Those two dumpsters carry a total of 9-10 tons between them. Some of the hallmark items collected beyond the typical cans and plastic bottles included boat anchors, motors and batteries and even a few children's toys.

The event was hosted by the City of Omaha Parks and Recreation Department, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District. Other participating entities included the University of Nebraska Lincoln's Invasive Species Project and the Keep Zorinsky Beautiful Committee. In addition to local Boy Scout and Cub Scout troops, the following civic groups joined in the cleanup effort:

• Millard West High School

• Burke High School

• Millard Knights Baseball

• The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

• Bellevue University

• University of Nebraska – Omaha

• Metro Community College

• Heartland Family Service

• Millard North Middle School

• Bellevue Offutt Kiwanis

• Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo

• Wheeler Elementary School

• Junior League of Omaha

• Terracon

• The parish of St. Vincent DePaul

• Nebraska Balloon Club

• Ezra Millard Elementary School

Several area businesses donated funds or items for a breakfast that preceded the event.

###

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Good news in the fight against zebra mussels! Our friends at the Nebraska Invasive Species Project have received funding to increase their educational outreach to boaters and other water recreationists.

**Trust grant to help fight zebra mussels invasion**
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Beginning Monday, Nebraska Invasive Species Project outreach workers will be on hand at some Nebraska lakes to help boaters prevent

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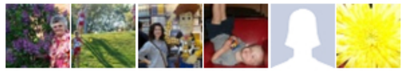

**MY BIRTHDAY PARTY**

Published Jul 14, 2011
Published Thursday July 14, 2011

# Zorinsky Lake refilling begins

By Nancy Gaarder
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

These zebra mussels were found at Zorinsky Lake this winter.

The refilling of Zorinsky Lake has begun after it was drained for seven months in an effort to kill off the invasive zebra mussel.

The Army Corps of Engineers closed the gates to the lake Tuesday.

Victory has been cautiously declared, but the zebra mussel is notoriously difficult to kill off. The goal behind draining the lake was to freeze out any living mussels. Because dirt clogged access to the drain, the lake was not completely emptied. As a result, it is possible that some mussels survived, especially around the 168th Street bridge, officials say.

How quickly the lake refills depends on the weather, said Jolene Hulsing, natural resources manager for the corps.

Dave Tunink of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission said the state probably will restock the lake this summer or fall with bass, bluegill and channel catfish.

Hulsing said the lake could fill in three months if rains are heavy, based on data from the wet year of 1993, or could take as long as 15 months if the region heads into a dry period like 2003.

Hulsing said many dead mussels were found during shoreline inspections. Water samples this year yielded no larvae. Additionally, no larvae have been found in other area lakes.

As of Tuesday, the lake was at a sea-level elevation of 1,092 feet. It will be considered full when the water level has risen 18 feet.

Local, state and federal officials agreed to drain the popular lake because the alternative was to allow the mussel a shot at taking over. Zebra mussels, their shells sharp as shards of glass, adhere to hard surfaces and clog inlets. The mollusks also can help deplete fish stocks by competing for food.

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North Platte, Nebraska

**News > State**

## Zebra mussel is big trouble in a small package

Print Page

**By Nancy Gaarder**

Published: Friday, February 4, 2011 4:07 AM CST

Omaha World-Herald

OMAHA - Barren, long-dead trees, caricatures of winter, stick up from the frozen basin. A long-submerged road has reappeared, a snowy path now leading nowhere.

The lake has become an open textbook on the turmoil that an invasive species can bring to an ecosystem.

Discovery of one tiny, clam-like invader in November triggered a chain of events that, within about a month, led to the draining of much of the lake's water. The lake could remain mostly empty into the fall or even another winter.

The zebra mussel is so pernicious, so prolific and so economically damaging, that its arrival in the U.S. in the late 1980s led within a few years to the first significant national legislation tackling invasive species.


Omaha's Lake Zorinsky, which has been lowered in an attempt to eradicate the zebra mussel, is seen here. Officials hope that lowering the water level will kill the mussels.



"It brings tears to my eyes. That lake was like a good friend to me," says Omaha fisherman Terry Johnson. "It was our little jewel here in Omaha."

Johnson is among some critics who point to failures elsewhere in combating the mussel. They believe the draining of Zorinsky was undertaken too hastily.

Johnson said the lake had been filled with "game fish we saved for our grandkids."

Scientists who have studied the mussel say it is tough to eradicate.

"I've got to give them credit for trying," said Don Schloesser, research biologist for the U.S. Geological Survey and author of a book on zebra mussels in North America. "My gut feeling is that it is not going to work."

Schloesser said remaining pools of water, niches in the Zorinsky lake bed and microenvironments, can sustain the mussel.

"Sooner or later, the zebra mussel will come back," he said. "If it doesn't come back internally, it will come from somewhere else, the same way it got there to begin with."

The mussel likely hitchhiked to Zorinsky on a boat that had been in infested waters elsewhere.

According to Mark D. Farr, who has studied invasive mussels for 10 years for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, draining Zorinsky was the logical choice. The Corp owns the lake.

"De-watering and exposure of zebra mussels to freezing air temperatures can be a very effective control measure," Farr said.

However, Farr, Schloesser and local researchers said, lakes vary in their abilities to sustain zebra mussels. Reasons range from a lake's oxygen level to its temperature.

The 31 mussels found in Zorinsky raise an intriguing question about the Omaha lake's ability to sustain the species. Some of the Zorinsky mussels are as big as any found in the U.S., said Karie Decker, Nebraska's invasive species coordinator.

"That surprised us," Decker said.

Their large size could mean that zebra mussels thrive in Zorinsky's waters, which would help validate the decision to drain the lake.

Or their size might mean that the lake isn't that hospitable, and it took several years for these zebra mussels to grow so big while not reproducing in significant numbers. Female mussels can produce 1 million larvae a year, with tens of thousands possibly surviving to adulthood.

Figuring that out "could be a piece of the puzzle," said Dick Taylor, one of the Corps of Engineers officials leading the Zorinsky effort.

If Zorinsky's environment were inhospitable, that might have lessened the need to act so quickly.

Complicating the problem, scientists don't have the ability to assess the age of zebra mussels, which can live for two to five years.

What scientists do know is that the mussels from Zorinsky spent their entire adult lives in that lake. Mussels attach to a site in a lake or on a boat when they are still larvae, never again budging. It's at that site where they gain their shells and their appearance of a clam.

If the huskiest of Zorinsky's zebra mussels matured within a year, that would be an indication the lake is a friendly environment and Zorinsky could have been on the verge of a population explosion.

When that happens, teeming communities of mussels cement together, creating a shard-like covering on hard surfaces, clogging valves and pipes. They feed at the bottom of the food chain, which alters the fish population, often depleting key species.

Noting that there are many caveats, officials tackling the problem at Zorinsky say there are factors that could improve their odds of success:

- Oxygen levels in the lake's water: Samples from Zorinsky have found, on occasion, locations where water deeper than 6 feet from the surface had too little oxygen to sustain zebra mussels.

That does not assure that only the top several feet of the lake are the only portion where the mussel can live, but it increases the possibility. The lake is being lowered by about 17.5 feet, so there's reason to hope - if mussels only lived in the top 6 feet - that all the mussels were frozen to death this winter.

- The aggressive lake-lowering: At other lakes where water levels were dropped to freeze out the mussel, the water level was not lowered by as much as at Zorinsky and was not been kept down for as long.

Lakes in Minnesota and Pennsylvania, for example, were kept low for less than two weeks. Zorinsky could be kept low 10 months or longer.

The Zorinsky research team will study the lowered lake this summer to learn more about its zebra mussel population.

They'll search the exposed lake bed and remaining water for dead or living adult mussels. They hope to determine the depth in Zorinsky that mussels are found.

Additionally, they will sample the water for living larvae. If they find larvae, it will mean some adults

survived the winter and had begun reproducing.

It could be possible for adults to survive the cold because a creek flows through Zorinsky and water in the remaining lake bed/creek is estimated to be about 15 feet deep. That water contains enough oxygen to sustain the zebra mussel, said John Hargrave, a biologist with the Corps of Engineers in Omaha.

What happens if live mussels or larvae are found?

"It's the $24,000 question," said Dave Jensen, a biologist at the Corps of Engineers in Omaha.

Other options have been considered and so far rejected as too costly or less likely to succeed.

Taylor said the team has a "pretty high expectation" they've done all they can.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding the efforts - and the loss of fish, turtles, snails and other aquatic life - officials say this was the right action.

"Most of us feel we wouldn't be doing our job if we didn't do everything we could to stop the zebra mussel," said Daryl Bauer, fisheries outreach manager for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

"There's going to be collateral damage, absolutely. We're aiming for long-term gain. If we've got a chance to do this at Zorinsky and keep them from spreading, we're going to do it." - World-Herald News Service

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# NEWS RELEASE

**U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS** **BUILDING STRONG®**

For Immediate Release:
Jan. 4, 2011

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## Corps to hold public meeting on Draft Lake Sakakawea Surplus Water Report, Environmental Assessment in Bismarck, N.D.

**Omaha, Neb. –** The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will hold a public meeting on Thursday, Jan. 6, at the Doublewood Inn, 1400 East Interchange Ave., in Bismarck, N.D. to collect recommendations, suggestions and comments regarding the draft Lake Sakakawea Surplus Water Report and Environmental Assessment (EA).

The meeting will run from 5 to 8 p.m. with an open house from 5 to 6 p.m. During the open house period, the public can submit written comments, view posters and speak one-on-one with Corps personnel regarding the draft report and assessment. The Corps will give a formal presentation from 6 to 6:30 p.m. and the final hour and a half (from 6:30 to 8 p.m.) will be reserved for public comments. A court reporter will document verbal comments for the record. Copies of the draft report and EA will be available for review.

**BACKGROUND:** The draft surplus water report proposes temporarily making up to 257,000 acre-feet of storage (100,000 acre-feet of yield) per year within the Garrison Dam / Lake Sakakawea Project, N.D. available for municipal and industrial water supply use. Temporarily making surplus water available will allow the Omaha District to enter into surplus water agreements for up to 257,000 acre-

feet of storage for surplus water to meet regional water needs until a permanent reallocation study can be completed. The draft EA, attached to the report, identifies baseline environmental conditions and analyzes potential impacts from the proposed use of surplus water.

The draft Lake Sakakawea Surplus Water Report and EA are available for viewing at: www.nwo.usace.army.mil/html/pd-p/review_plans.html and in hardcopy at libraries in Bismarck, Dickinson, Garrison, Riverdale, Williston, New Town, Beulah and Hazen, N.D. The public may submit comments via comment forms available at the public meeting and at libraries where the report is located. Written comments should be sent to: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District; CENWO-OD-T; ATTN: Lake Sakakawea Surplus Water Report and EA; 1616 Capitol Avenue; Omaha, NE 68102-4901. Comments can also be emailed to: garrisonsurplusstudy@usace.army.mil. Comments must be postmarked or received no later than Jan. 17, 2011.

###

# State officials blast Corps of Engineers water storage fee proposal

- Story
- Discussion

State officials blast Corps of Engineers water storage fee proposal

By BRIAN GEHRING Bismarck Tribune BismarckTribune.com | Posted: Thursday, January 6, 2011 10:40 pm | (7) Comments

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Buy this photo TOM STROMME/Tribune Larry Janis, left, the Corps of Engineers Water Supply business line manager for Lake Sakakawea answered questions before speaking at Thursday night's public meeting in Bismarck. At right is Jan Swenson, who said her concern was with the amount of water being drawn from the reservoir.

In what was one of Gov. Jack Dalrymple's first public speeches on issues facing North Dakota, he called a Corps of Engineers plan to charge Lake Sakakawea water users a storage fee an "outrage" and an "unconscionable and unjust attempt to achieve monetary gain where none is justified."

The newly-appointed governor's comments Thursday night drew a standing ovation from roughly 300 people attending a public hearing on the corps' plan released Dec. 16.

Dalrymple was not the only one with strong opposition to the plan.

Shane Goettle, state director for Sen. John Hoeven, R-N.D., Tex Hall, chairman of the Three Affiliated Tribes, and North Dakota Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem all testified against the plan.

Dalrymple said prior to a 2008 corps real estate policy, Lake Sakakawea water users were able to access water with being charged a fee.

The proposal would charge those drawing water from the lake a fee of $21.91 per acre-foot of water with a maximum use of 100,000 acre-feet of water.

An acre-foot of water is the amount of water that it takes to cover one acre of land with water a foot deep.

Larry Janis of the corps' Omaha office said the Flood Control Act of 1944 has provisions that allow the corps to quantify surplus water in the dam and charge a fee.

In this case, municipal and industrial uses of that water fall under that provision.

In essence, the corps would charge users a fee to store water for future use, water most believe is North Dakota's.

Goettle said one thing the state has been trying to quantify is what constitutes natural flow of the Missouri River, something that is guaranteed under federal law.

"If all the water behind the dam were to be released tomorrow ... what remains of the Missouri River and the natural flow ... would belong to the state of North Dakota," Goettle said.

He said the idea of using water storage contracts more than a half century after the Garrison Dam was built to recover the cost of its construction is "beyond any rationally articulated policy; it simply does not make sense."

Stenehjem said the U.S. Constitution gives states special legal rights to free-flowing rivers and that has repeatedly been upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court.

"Even if the Garrison Dam had not been built," Stenehjem said, "it borders on an insult to demand we pay for it."

Dalrymple noted the corps plan only proposes a storage fee for water users in the Upper Missouri River Basin but does not charge a similar fee for downstream states that benefit from use of the water for hydropower, navigation, water supplies or flood control.

Hall said in a meeting earlier in the day with other state tribal officials, none were aware of the plan.

Hall said the corps is bound by treaty to consult with tribes on issues that might adversely affect them.

“Has that order been repealed by President Obama?” he asked.

“I’ve been gone (as tribal chairman) for four years,” he said. “But I haven’t been gone that long. I found out about this in the newspaper.”

Hall said none of the tribes relieved notification of the study or the plan.

“It’s beyond an oversight,” Hall said. “It’s total disregard ... charging a fee for our own water. We clearly feel this would be an adverse action.”

Dalrymple said the plan not only threatens future energy but also the future of agriculture and water supplies for cities through projects like the Southwest Pipeline Project.

“Financial claims have not been sought in the past and contradict states’ rights and congressional authorizations,” Dalrymple said.

“All considerations for the use of Missouri River water have been settled in the past and should not be open to further discussion.”

(Reach reporter Brian Gehring at 250-8254 or brian.gehring@bismarcktribune.com.)



Posted in Govt-and-politics on *Thursday, January 6, 2011 10:40 pm* | Tags: North Dakota, Jack Dalrymple, Missouri River, Geography Of North Dakota, Lake Sakakawea, John Hoeven, Wayne Stenehjem, Corps Of Engineers, Garrison Dam, Shane Goettle, United States Army Corps Of Engineers, United States, Missouri, Flood Control Act Of 1944, Governor, Newly-appointed Governor, Chairman, Attorney General, State Director For Sen. John Hoeven R-n.d., State Director, Corps Real Estate Policy, Larry Janis, Federal Law, Tribal Chairman, Pipeline Project, Energy, Brian Gehring,



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