

Statement from the Mississippi Levee Board
April 8, 2020

BUILD THE PUMPS TO HELP THE ENVIRONMENT

The Yazoo Backwater had its worst flood in 2019, and 2020 could see similar impacts. The human and economic damages of floods are well known. The Mississippi Levee Board is releasing this statement to set the record straight on the environmental benefits of flood control. Solid scientific data demonstrates that the Yazoo Backwater Pumps will help not hurt the environment.

The severe environmental damage of backwater flooding has not received the attention it deserves, because the focus has been on the economic and human hardship of flooding. Some extreme environmental groups opposing the Pumps claim to protect the environment but in fact removing high flood water won't hurt wetland habitat and will help protect fisheries, wildlife, trees and water quality. Here is a brief summary of the facts:

- Backwater Wetlands are Sustained by Rain, not Flooding. The Corps has over ten years of wetland monitoring data that confirms that the hydrology source for wetlands is the over 53 inches of annual rainfall, not periodic backwater flooding. This means that removing the high floodwater *will not harm* the wetlands. This data is published in a wetland scientific journal, the Journal of Society of Wetland Scientists.
 - In the past, the Corp ignored the role of rainfall in its wetland analysis as a conservative approach, which overstated adverse impacts of the Pumps.
- Aquatic Species Suffer and Die in Flood Water. The federal government has records of fish sampling in the warm, murky waters typical of backwater floods showing that few species survive. The sitting water causes hypoxia (lack of oxygen) and damages all aquatic species. The waterfowl dependent on aquatic species also suffer.
- Backwater Floods Exhibit Poor Water Quality. The records demonstrate that the water quality declines in the flood waters, which of course causes damage to aquatic species and vegetation that relies on cleaner, flowing water.
- Tree Stands Are Damaged by Floods. We understand that there is data showing that some trees and plants, including commercial timber and Corps mitigation projects (tree planting, costing millions of taxpayer dollars) suffer losses in the high standing water typical of backwater flooding.
- Floods cause Wildlife Deaths. Everyone in the community knows about the dead deer and other wildlife that was lost during the 2019 flood. It is tragic to see wildlife trying to escape floods. The damage impacts reproduction, reducing populations in the future.

All this data demonstrates that pumping off high flood water will help the environment, not hurt it. Wetland habitats will not be “dried out” by pumping off flood water since they are sustained by rain rather than floods. In fact, over 200,000 acres will be underwater at elevation 87’ before the pumps ever cut on. Damage to trees, habitat and terrestrial and aquatic wildlife will be reduced by reducing the extent and duration of backwater flooding.

Natural resource proponents have recognized the environmental damages of continued flooding. For example:

- The Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks voted in June 2019 to support the Backwater Pumps because, among other things, “the longer the wildlife habitat remains underwater, the ability of that habitat to produce a good quality food source and cover for the animals will be negatively impacted. Indeed, our biologists are predicting that reproduction for some species in the impacted areas will be drastically reduced, as well as survival for adult animals.”
- In August 2019, the Nature Conservancy in Mississippi wrote to Congressman Bennie Thompson and Senators Roger Wicker and Cindy Hyde-Smith in support of re-evaluation of the Backwater Pumps noting that flooding imposes a “tremendous burden on the natural resources, its residents and local economies. The southern portion of the Mississippi Delta will be attempting to recover for years to come due to the damage from the 2019 flood.”
- The Mississippi Forestry Commission passed a Resolution in support of the Backwater Pumps on March 10, 2020 for, among other reasons, the adverse impact on “natural habitat, wildlife, trees”.

These are but a few of the sources of information about the adverse impacts of flooding on ecological and natural resources. The Pumps would reduce and prevent this environmental harm.

It has been almost 12 years since the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) vetoed the Yazoo Backwater Pumps. We’ve suffered severe economic and community hardships with floods in that time. Mississippi State economists found that the 2019 flood cost \$42,160 per affected household in self-assessed costs to deal with the flood that are not expected to be covered by insurance or assistance program. We are a local economy dependent on agriculture, so when farmers can’t plant a crop, the entire economy feels the pain. We can’t continue with these losses.

As planned in 2007, the Pumps Project had significant elements designed to help the environment. A major portion of the flood control was non-structural, through purchase of 55,600 acres of mitigation easements on crop land below elevation 87’, to be planted with trees. As a compromise to environmentalists, the Project adjusted the “pump on” level to leave over 200,000 acres of land flooded before the Pumps could be turned on. And mitigation for the impacts at the pumping station location and the Yazoo Backwater Levee called for purchase

and planting trees on 519 acres. Now all the data supports the conclusion that removing flood water helps preserves ecological resources.

We don't see how any pro-environmental organization with accurate information could continue to oppose the Pumps. Yet some extreme groups continue to argue that the Pumps will harm the environment.

We need to get all of the information out to the public so that everyone can understand the environmental benefits of pumping. The federal government should release any data it has to counter the false information argued by some extreme opponents about the Pumps.

The Corps is moving forward to update its documentation of impacts of the Pumps. We understand that they plan to complete this process during 2020 with a decision by January 2021. We urge them to act quickly, so that the devastating damage to people, the economy and the environment can end.

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