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`Change Is Coming' on Missouri River Report Forces Reconsideration of Economics

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By Tom Uhlenbrock Of the Post-Dispatch

For decades, states on the lower Missouri River have insisted that the river should be managed for barge traffic carrying chemicals to and grain from the farm belt.

But a new government report says barge traffic is far less important than other uses - water supply, recreation, power and flood control.

The report is forcing a broad reassessment of how to manage the Missouri. George Hanley, an Army Corps of Engineers official in Kansas City, predicts: "A change is coming."

The change begins with the corps' master water control manual, which determines how much Missouri River water is released from upstream reservoirs. The corps is revising the manual, and a draft of the revision assigns a surprising ranking of economic values:

Hydroelectric power is tops with a value of \$626 million a year.

Water supply ranks second, at \$544 million.

Recreation is third, at \$48 million.

Flood control is fourth, at \$41 million.

Commercial navigation is last, at \$16 million.

The volume of goods hauled on the Missouri each year dropped to 2.5 million tons last year, down from a peak of 3.3 million in 1977. By comparison, 380 million tons moved on the Mississippi River last year.

"When is enough enough?" asks Jerry Rasmussen of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Rasmussen is pushing for new priorities in managing the Missouri and its flood plain. He says the Flood of 1993 has provided a great chance to allow the straight, swift-flowing river to revert to a more natural state better suited for flood control, wildlife and recreation.

"The river has been held prisoner," says Rasmussen, who is based in Columbia, Mo. "We need a more common sense approach that allows it more breathing room. And if we don't do it now, it's not going to get done."

INDUSTRY ON PARADE

Some history helps to understand the corps' approach to managing the Missouri. In 1944, Congress adopted the Pick-Sloan Plan, which created a barge channel from St. Louis to Sioux City, Iowa.

"The United States at the time was very much like the old newsreel 'Industry on Parade,' which opened with smokestacks belching and all that stuff," said Paul Johnston of the corps' Omaha,

Neb., office. "We had just won the greatest war in human history; we had atom bombs and great technology.

"Hydroelectric power, navigation, water supply to cities, that was all a national priority. Recreation wasn't that important. Now there's a shift, there's a different priority."

LEVEES AND FLOOD DAMAGE

The Pick-Sloan Plan actually provided for many of those other uses in calling for a 5,000-foot floodway along the Missouri from Kansas City to St. Louis. But the floodway - a bottom-land area in which the river could expand during high water - never was implemented, because landowners wanted to use the land for other purposes.

Once the river was limited to a 300-foot channel by the bank-stabilization program, farmers and others moved in and built levees to protect the land. Those levees were overwhelmed by this year's flooding.

SECOND THOUGHTS

Although the corps has begun rebuilding many of those levees, Rasmussen said alternatives should be considered, such as setting levees back from the river and allowing flood-prone fields to revert to wetlands.

"We could minimize the flood damages over the long haul and create tremendous benefits for fish and wildlife and recreation," he said. "At the same time, you could allow agricultural production in areas with no levee protection.

"In dry years, you get a heck of a crop. In wet years, you lose it."

The corps already is working to open up the floodway in what it calls the Missouri River Mitigation Project, which, essentially, undoes some of the corps' previous efforts to tame the river. ...

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