

The Great Flood of '93

by Peter Stekel and Boo Turner

Will the aftermath bring vision to flood control?

Floods are nothing new, but decades of dam construction, water diversions, and structural barriers such as levees, have given us the false sense of security that "it can't happen here." Last summer, the Mother of All Waters, the Mississippi, taught us a painful lesson: Tinkering with Mother Nature may actually increase flood crests and transfer flooding problems downstream.

Resistance to change exists amongst the myriad of governmental organizations responsible for the \$25 billion invested over the last century in structural flood control solutions in the Mississippi River basin. Last August, with more than 800 federal and non-federal levees (out of 1,400) overtopped or ruptured, Lt. General Arthur Williams of the Army Corps of Engineers asserted that "the federal flood control system worked extremely well," in the Midwest. With the deluge of damages exceeding \$12 billion, what would designate a system that failed?

Directing a critical torrent at the Corps, among others, in the wake of a mammoth flood is easy. But centuries of poor land management practices have resulted in the loss of more than 20 million acres of wetlands from the upper Mississippi and Missouri drainages. Studies show that wetlands act as natural sponges, storing run-off water and releasing it over time.

But there is a silver lining in the clouds that brought the flood's harsh lesson. The piecemeal and largely structural approach to flood control is under scrutiny, and major changes are possible.

The first bright sign was the enactment of a bill (H.R. 3012) that increased the amount of funding from \$24 to \$105 million that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has to spend on relocation from flood-prone areas in the Midwest. This pot of gold is enough to allow 207 river towns, totaling 10,000 structures, to volunteer to relocate out of harm's way. Relocation from the floodplain not only protects people and property for the long haul, it also reduces the long-term burden on the taxpayer. And

critically important, it restores the natural flood control functions of the floodplains. It is an important step on the long road that may change a flood control strategy that has long been skewed towards disaster relief, not prevention.

Another unique program is also in the works. The Emergency Wetlands Reserve Program allocated \$15 million towards purchasing easements from land owners who voluntarily agree to restore farmed, converted or potential wetlands. The Soil

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Conservation Service expects offers of five or six acres for every acre that can be purchased.

These programs certainly heed the Clinton Administration's call for innovative and cost-effective approaches to flood control that reduce long-term flood losses and restore floodplains. Alternatively, the cost to rebuild levees runs at \$1 million or more per mile. This cost is largely (80 percent) borne by the federal government, even though the majority of levees to be rebuilt or repaired were privately built or maintained.

Environmental organizations, led by American Rivers, the World Wildlife Fund and the Environmental Defense Fund, have also emphasized the need for a comprehensive interagency flood control strategy. At the federal level, more than 25 subdivisions of 12 departments and agencies have some small piece of the nation's flood control

puzzle. Add to that regional, state and local influence over drainage and flood control, and the result is a system confused by the tyranny of small decisions, often working at cross purposes.

A potential starting point on the legislative front may be H.R. 2931. It would authorize the Army Corps of Engineers to do a comprehensive analysis of floodplain management in the Upper Mississippi River basin. Critics, commending the proposed bill in substance, argue that the task should truly be an integrated effort drawing upon the expertise of those in agricultural, river science and community development.

Fingers have long been pointed at the National Flood Insurance Program, founded in 1968, for encouraging development in flood-prone areas. The program made flood insurance available for property in hazardous areas, in return for enactment and enforcement of floodplain management regulations designed to

reduce future flood losses. However, according to American Rivers, the number of dwellings built in the nation's 22,000 flood-prone communities has actually risen by 40 percent since the program was adopted. Introduced last year, H.R. 3191, the Flood Insurance Reform Act, is pending in Congress.

As Washington muddles through these and other proposals, the opportunity for change is clear for American Rivers President Kevin Coyle. "Let's reunite rivers with their natural floodplains, if possible. When we rebuild levees, let's do so farther away from the river to allow more room for rising waters. We need to offer real choices to people who wish to relocate out of the floodplain."

There are many lessons the mightiest river in America taught us this summer. The price of ignoring this lesson yet again would be unconscionably high. ■

Paddling Events

Bulletin Board

■ April 8-10, **Eighteenth Annual American Red Cross Canoe and Kayak School**, Cleveland, Ohio. The first of several paddling programs for Ohioans. Contact Bob Berthold, Greater Cleveland Red Cross Chapter, (216) 431-3323 or the Ohio Division of Watercraft, Cleveland, (216) 361-1212.

■ April 8-10, **Canoe Expo '94**, Etobicoke Olympium, Ontario. Three days of seminars, exhibitors and demonstrations on paddling. Contact Canoe Ontario, 1220 Shepard Avenue E., Suite 323, Willowdale, Ontario M2K 2X1; (+1) 495-4180.

■ April 16-20, **Rigging for Rescue**. Professional seminar in technical rope work for people involved in rescue. Also in May and June. Contact P.O. Box 399, Invermere, British Columbia Canada V0A 1K0; (604) 342-6042.

■ April 22-24, **The Canoe Event & Outdoor Adventure Expo**, Midwest Mountaineering, Minneapolis, MN. Friday 5:00 - 10:00 pm, Saturday 9:00 am - 6:00 pm, Sunday 11:00 am - 5:00 pm. Contact Midwest Mountaineering (612) 339-3433.

■ April 24, **Outdoor Adventure Expo**, Monmouth County Park System, Turkey Swamp Park, Georgia Road, Freehold Township. For more information call (908) 842-4000, extension 296.

■ April 30 - May 1, **Seattle Paddlefest**, Lake Washington, Seattle. April 30th - canoes, May 1st - kayaks. For more information contact Pacific Water Sports (206) 246-9385.

■ May 7-25th, **Annual Manasquan River Canoe Race**. 8-mile canoe and kayak race. Contact Monmouth County Parks, 805 Newman Springs Road, Lincroft, NJ 07738; (908) 842-4000. Deadline April 20.

■ May 14-21, **National River Cleanup Week**. Third annual event to better more than 15,000 miles of waterways. Join in and clean up your favorite stream! In 1993, more than 30,000 volunteers scoured over 11,000 miles in over 400 clean ups. Contact National River Cleanup, P.O. Box 1348, Knoxville, TN 37901; (615) 524-4814.

■ May 27-29, **West Michigan Coastal Kayaking Symposium**, Big Blue Lake, Muskegon, MI. Contact Al Anderson, WMCKA, P.O. Box 1706, Frankfort, MI 49635; (616) 352-7774.

■ June 11-12, **L.L. Bean Canoe Camp** (formerly known as the North American Canoe Symposium), at Camp Winona on Moose pond in Bridgton, Maine. For more information call (800) 341-4341.

■ June 11-12, **Third Annual Lake Huron Sea Kayak Workshop**, Tawas City, Michigan. Sponsored by the Northeastern Michigan Sierra Club. Features British Canoe Union certified instruction on all facets of the sport, and demos, and evening folk music program. Contact Gary Nelkie, 218 West Bay Street, East Tawas, MI 48730, (517) 362-2001.

■ July 16, **Eppie's Great Race**, American River near Sacramento, CA. 21-year old triathlon features paddling, and benefits recreational opportunities for people with disabilities. Contact Eppie's, 1700 I Street, Suite 120, Sacramento, CA 95814; (800) 735-2929 or (916) 366-2940.