

Great Rivers Habitat Alliance

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August 12, 2016

Alton, Illinois

Testimony before the Mississippi River Commission

By David Stokes

Great Rivers Habitat Alliance

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the commission today. My name is David Stokes. I am the new executive director of Great Rivers Habitat Alliance, a nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to preserving floodplains and wetlands for recreation, agriculture, and hunting along the Confluence of the Mississippi, Missouri, and Illinois rivers. The ideas presented here are my own.

In the six months that I have been with Great Rivers Habitat Alliance, I have learned a great deal about so many interesting water and habitat issues. I will be the first to admit that I have much more to learn.

In my time with GRHA, as I travel the state listening to the concerns of property owners and conservationists, I am yet to hear one legitimate reason for the Corps of Engineers and others to move ahead with the New Madrid Levee project. Nothing about the project seems beneficial. It is bad for taxpayers, who would be forced to pay for this unneeded addition with no public benefits. It is harmful to fish, birds, and wildlife, which is why the Missouri Department of Conservation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service both oppose it. It puts towns and people at greater risk for flood damage in order to increase the value of farmland which has already received flood easement payments. In short, the St. John's New Madrid levee project is the type of special interest giveaway boondoggle that gives other special interest giveaway boondoggles a bad name. This Commission should direct the Army Corps of Engineers to halt work on the New Madrid levee and cease all planning, funding, and other work on the project once and for all.

Further north, I hope that this commission sees to it that the documented actions by the Sny Island levee district to improperly increase their levee heights are corrected. It is imperative for the public to trust in the flood management policies in our region. Knowing that certain levee districts are flouting their authorizations takes away from that public trust. I sincerely hope that this commission enforces levee height regulations on Sny Island, or any other levee operator found to be exceeding authorized heights.

Finally, my last comment is not specific to any one project or proposal. I believe it may be time to rearrange the priorities of river and floodplain management away from the construction of any new levees and towards a focus on properly maintaining the levees we have that are genuinely necessary for public safety.

According to the National Levee Database, of the levees found within the United States, only 1.9% of these levees were rated acceptable, while 53.7% were rated minimally acceptable, and 44.5% were rated unacceptable. This means that nearly half of our nation's levees are stamped with an unacceptable rating.¹ Let's prioritize fixing the levees that are truly necessary before we build any new levels. Furthermore, I believe it would be a very rare circumstance indeed where any new levee proposal passed a true cost-benefit analysis.

Our great rivers are for everyone, not just the barge industry and related interests. New levee construction along the Mississippi and other rivers should cease for the long-term as we try to balance the many, varied interests and uses of our rivers. I appreciate the work of this commission as you all try to accomplish these goals.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you all today.

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¹ Pinter, Nicholas, et al, "Modeling residual flood risk behind levees, Upper Mississippi River, USA" *Environmental Science & Policy*, Vol. 58, 2016.