



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on May 4, 2011

Army Corps of Engineers Blows Mississippi River Levee

The Army Corps of Engineers blew open two miles of levee along the Mississippi River in Missouri May 2, an effort that may have saved the community of Cairo, Illinois, but which flooded 200 square miles of fertile farmland, which Missouri Governor Jay Nixon called “literally the most productive part of our continent.”



The [New York Times](#) reported May 3 that the massive flood of river released by the Army Corps of Engineers into the 130,000 acre floodway “will soon re-enter the Mississippi near New Madrid [Missouri], through two 5,500-foot stretches blasted out over two days at the lower end of the basin, and the crest will continue to roll on, with the river expected to match or beat its previous record heights at many points along the way.”

Major General Michael Walsh of the Army Corps of Engineers predicted that his team was just at the beginning of its effort to control the river, which had reached record levels over the past few days. The *Times* reported that the Army Corps’ “decision to inundate the 130,000 acres within the spillway’s basin almost certainly saved the town of Cairo, Illinois. The river had reached a record 61.7 feet at Cairo before the explosion and was predicted to rise more than a foot further.” The *Times* quoted Colonel Vernie Reichling Jr. of the Army Corps’ Memphis District as saying that they would most likely have to “fight this river all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico. I don’t see this letting up.”

According to [CNN](#), the first blast on May 2 at the levee near Birds Point, Missouri was followed up by a second the next day at New Madrid, Missouri, with a third planned for May 4 near Hickman, Kentucky. “The second and third blasts, downstream of Birds Point, will allow floodwater to return to the Mississippi River,” CNN reported.

While the main defenses against the Mississippi River were expected to hold, additional flooding was “likely as water backs up into the rivers and tributaries that feed into the Mississippi, and tests ‘non-federal’ levees that line those waterways,” reported the *Times*. Jeff Grascchel of the Lower Mississippi River Forecast Center, a subsidiary of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, told the paper that while federal levees are strong enough to handle what the river will bring, “anything that’s non-federal is a different story.”

Although residents of Cairo, Illinois, and other towns saved by the Army’s actions were grateful, those in the flooded areas, especially those who farm the hundreds of thousands of acres of fertile land, had a different take. Farmer Bryan Feezor told CNN that the sight of his submerged fields made him sick. “Farming is all I ever have done ... and it’s under water, he said. “I really don’t know [what I’m going to do].”



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“It’s a life-changing event,” one local farmer, Travis Williams, told [CBN News](#). “My heart goes out to all the farmers who lost their land and homes.”

Even with the Army Corps’ actions, a plan Walsh said had been designed decades ago for such a contingency, and which had “operated as designed,” communities and residents along the Mississippi remained in danger. The residents of Cairo remained under a mandatory evacuation, and another six other communities had been issued voluntary evacuation notices, Patti Thompson, a spokeswoman for the Illinois Emergency Management Agency, told CNN. “We’re definitely not out of the woods yet,” she said. “The levees are all very saturated right now and they’re going to continue to have a lot of pressure on them for several days.”

Even with the series of breaches, the National Weather Service continued to predict near-record flooding in southern Illinois, southwest Indiana, western Kentucky and Tennessee, southeastern Missouri, northeastern Arkansas, and even into Mississippi and Louisiana.

Execution of the plan did not come without major conflict, with the state of Missouri taking the Army Corps of Engineers to federal court over the plan. “The state argued the floodwater would deposit silt on the estimated 130,000 acres, and years, along with millions of dollars, would be required to fix the damage,” noted the CNN report. By Sunday, May 1, the case had made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which declined to intervene, clearing the way for Walsh to initiate what he called a “heart-wrenching” decision. “I’ve been involved with flooding for 10 years and it takes a long time to recover from something like this,” he said.

Reflecting afterward on the decision to blow the levees, and on the prospect that more would have to be destroyed before it was over, Walsh said that choosing between saving Cairo and other communities or saving the farms in the flood plain was not “easy or hard. It’s simply grave, because the decision leads to loss of property and livelihood, either in a floodway or in an area that was not designed to flood.”

It seemed clear that Walsh sympathized with those who would bear the brunt of his decision, telling one group of Missouri property owners, “I recognize all of your lives will be impacted, but these levees have never been under this pressure before.”

According to the [Associated Press](#), even those opposed to the Army Corps’ actions “appreciate how Walsh — who is responsible for managing the entire length of the Mississippi River valley, from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico—has handled the situation.” Even Governor Nixon, whose administration took the lead in trying to stop the levees from being destroyed, conceded that Walsh “has a very difficult decision to make relatively quickly. He understands the magnitude of the decision on his plate.”

Nixon said his focus would now turn to having the Missouri levees rebuilt and to restoring the lost farmland to productivity. But officials warned that it could be early fall before the water drains from the land, and that sediment left by the river could do lasting damage to the once fertile acreage.



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