

A River of Special Interests Entitlement

By Brad Walker MCE Rivers Director

The issue of 2011 flooding was in the news again, initiated by a 10-10-14 St. Louis Post-dispatch [article by Robert Schneiders](#) criticizing the recent Missouri River farmers' lawsuit against the Corps, a lawsuit that alleges improper river management had caused unnecessary flooding. A [response](#) to Mr. Schneiders' letter was provided on 10-18-14 by the Executive Director of the Coalition to Protect the Missouri River (CPMR), which for those interested is actually a pro-agribusiness group seemingly dedicated to keeping the lower Missouri River from becoming just a bit more natural. As this response indicates, CPMR believes trying to save "two birds and a fish" is a waste of taxpayer money; money that could be better spent propping up navigation and repairing levees.

Contrary to the CPMR article's characterization, the U.S. Corps of Engineers (Corps) Missouri River restoration effort is not just about saving three endangered species. This is a crass and very simplistic framing of what is actually going on with the efforts of the Corps, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and state agencies to recover an all but dead Missouri River. Because our environmental and natural resources laws are written primarily to allow the exploitation of all resources, the principal legislative tool that is available to temper that onslaught is the Endangered Species Act. The three animals are actually proxies for the unprecedented loss of Missouri River natural floodplain and river habitat, in other words the proverbial canaries in the mine. The photo below (Figure 1) is a typical view of how the Missouri River has been channelized and its floodplain disconnected between Sioux City, IA, to St. Louis.

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Figure 1: 2011 Flood Repair of Channel Along Missouri River
Source: US Army Corps

History – Wholesale Destruction and the Battle for a Bit of Restored Nature

What has occurred on the lower Missouri River through the construction of what is called [the Bank Stabilization and Navigation Project \(BSNP\)](#) was an extraordinary effort beginning as early as the late 1880s but considerably escalated in the 1950s, to totally destroy a major river, an unparalleled effort in the U.S., if not the world. This destruction was done at the request of commercial interests including agribusiness and the navigation industries, and was completely

paid for by the U.S. taxpayer.

Upon the completion of the BSNP in the very early 1980s, the Corps and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service were already working on their evaluation of its immense impact upon the environment. This 1981 mitigation report documents what might be called their great “oops” moment – no sooner did they complete the project than they began working on how to fix it (see Figure 2). In summary, their report stated that 100,000 acres of river habitat was destroyed and 422,000 acres of floodplain habitat was destroyed, and only 2% of the natural environment remained.

These vanished natural acres represent billions of lost dollars in annual public benefits. Nearly all of those floodplain acres were turned into [intensively-farmed row crops, which provide little if any public benefit](#). What remained of the river was an occasional 9-foot deep, swift moving barge canal. What was lost was the habitat that the pallid sturgeon, one of those three “proxy” animals, completely depended upon. By 1999 Congress had determined that nearly 167,000 acres was needed to return portions of the river to a more natural state through the [Missouri River Recovery Program \(MRRP\)](#).

It is important to note that had the BSNP been proposed after 1986, by law (Water Resources Development Act of 1986 - Section 906: [Fish and Wildlife Mitigation](#)) there would have been a requirement to mitigate all of those

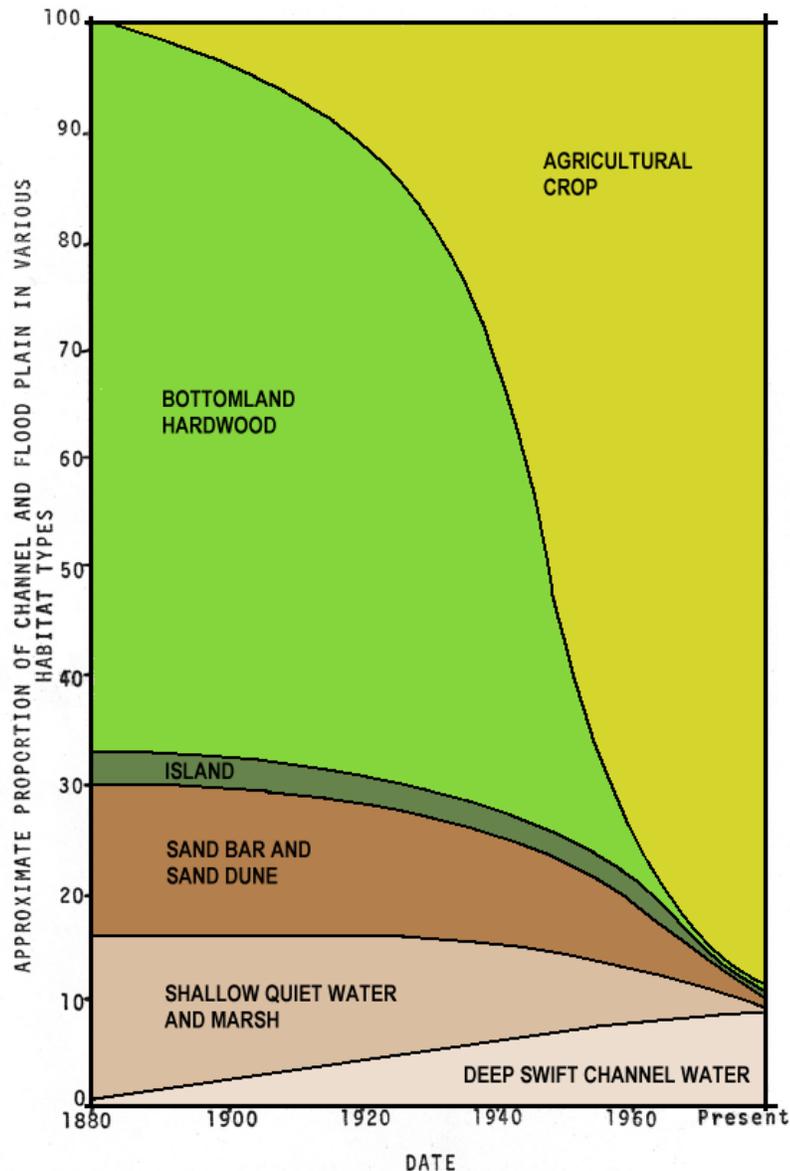
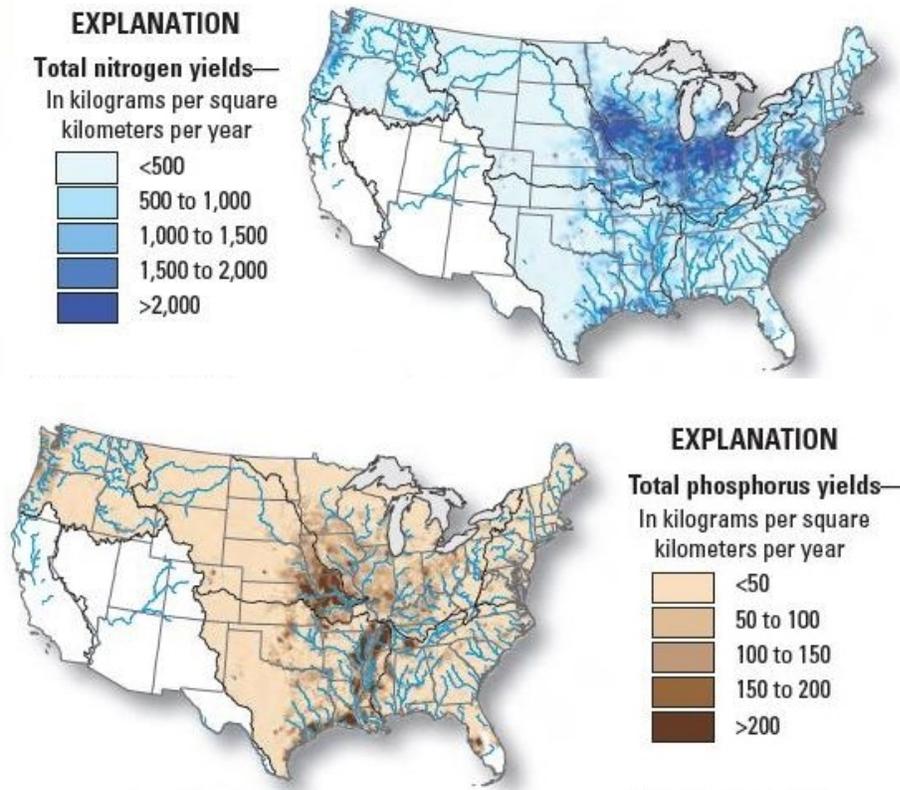


Figure 4. Estimated changes in habitat types between 1880 and present within the area influenced by the bank stabilization and navigation work. (Dr. Charles Segelquist, Eastern Energy and Land Use Team, Fish and Wildlife Service).

Figure 2: Historic Land Changes to Lower Missouri River, 1880 to 1980
Source: US Fish and Wildlife Service

lost 522,000 habitat acres; with those who benefited having to share the cost of the mitigation. Because this level of mitigation would have likely been physically and financially impossible to achieve, we must conclude that the BSNP would never have been built. This conclusion underscores how extreme these unprecedented physical changes to the river were and how uneconomical the project was.

The BSNP construction cost was at least \$1 billion (in today's dollars) and has resulted in virtually no consistent commercial barge traffic. Its predecessor, a failed 6-foot barge channel, had cost the taxpayers at least \$250 million before it was abandoned by Congress. The taxpayers also annually pay between \$7 and \$10 million to maintain the Bank Stabilization and Navigation Project. After the 2011 flood the taxpayers paid another \$500 million to repair the flood damage to the BSNP system and the upper river reservoir system. The taxpayers also subsidize levee construction and maintenance; subsidize crop and flood insurance; and get no industry support in the constant battle to clean up the agricultural pesticides and fertilizers polluting our rivers (see Figure 3).



Politics and Self-Interests Pursued with a Vengeance

But per Congressional authorization of the [Missouri River Recovery Program \(MRRP\) in 1999](#), we finally have agreement on how to fix the mess the BSNP created between 1950 and 1980 by buying and restoring those nearly 167,000 acres. Although these acres will not fix the river, they will make a marked improvement in it by returning to the public a portion of those lost services and hopefully these changes help to recover the pallid sturgeon. So far

Figure 3: Nitrogen and Phosphorus Geographical Yields Source: USGS

funding limitations have hampered the purchase of these acres. From the mitigation study in 1981, to the original 1986 legislation authorized the purchase of about 48,000 acres, to the MRRP amendment in 1999 increasing that acreage to 167,000 acres, we have acquired only about 67,000. At this current glacial rate, the nearly 167,000 acres will not be fully purchased until 2042, assuming the recent funding cuts are reinstated. See Figure 4.

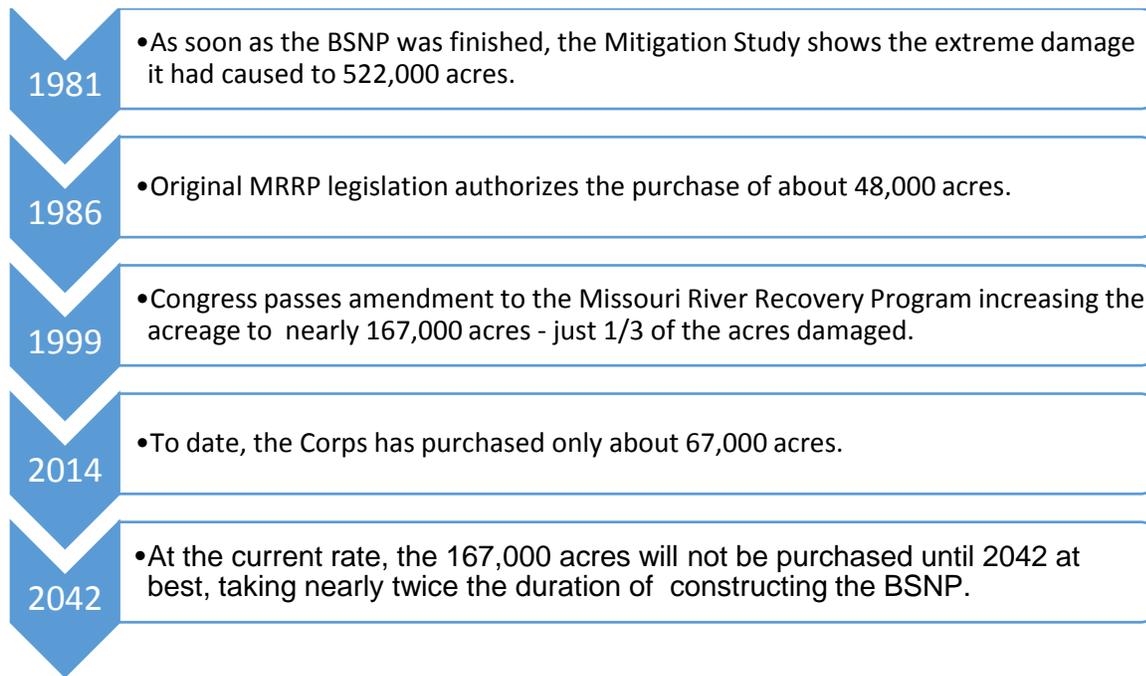


Figure 4: Timeline of Missouri River Recovery Program Land Acquisition Milestones

But the special interests that promoted and benefit from the BSNP have from the start fought the land acquisition efforts and the potential alterations to river management. Recent comments by [Nebraska Senators](#) and ongoing legislative efforts by [Missouri Congressional leaders](#) who represent members of the pro-agribusiness community are reflective of the political effort to undermine the MRRP.

Unfortunately, it is often hard to counter a false sense of entitlement, especially when those receiving the plunder are well off and have an exaggerated view of their worth to the nation. What is produced by the Missouri River floodplain “farmers” is exactly what is grown almost everywhere else in the Midwest – feed corn and soybeans. These are two commodities that are grown in such overabundance in the U.S. that we have had to invent other inefficient uses for them such as soda sweetener and an inefficient vehicle fuel. The problems with industrialized agriculture are a well known phenomenon that I discussed in a recent blog article called [Nefarious Connections](#).

Agricultural interests have spent more than a century influencing and manipulating the political system to stabilize the Missouri River so they can exploit the floodplain and establish the minimally used 9-foot deep navigation canal. Regrettably for the taxpayer, as predicted in a 1915 report by Corps engineer Lt. Colonel Herbert Deakyne, there has never been adequate barge traffic on the Missouri to justify the cost of the channel.

The thought that a healthier river might benefit everyone apparently means nothing when your welfare stream may be impacted. We know from the experience of 2011 that when the inevitable floods come and damage the river infrastructure, the “beneficiaries” demand that the government immediately spend millions of dollars to put their levees back again, while they concurrently receive government payment for the losses of their planted livestock and vehicle feed. But the taxpayer’s wallets are nearly empty and it is difficult to expect this one-sided exchange to continue indefinitely.

The Public’s Great Loss

It is clear that Missouri River floodplain landowners believe they are being negatively impacted by the recovery and restoration efforts authorized by Congress. It will likely require major alterations to how the river has been managed over the last several decades and lead to either

the outright purchase at fair prices of 100,000 acres of land, or the purchase of easements on a portion of that land. From MCE's perspective, the construction of the BSNP was an immense and costly "taking" from the public commons. Although opponents do not agree, the MRRP is a reasonable response for mitigating the massive losses caused to the public by the BSNP.

When all costs and impacts are accounted for, it likely costs the public for that floodplain farmer to raise their corn.

The principal public loss from the public commons has been the economic value of those transformed half million acres of natural land and water. An acre of healthy productive floodplain or wetlands can provide benefits valued at up to \$10,000 each and every year. The public benefits from those restored acres will dwarf the benefits currently received by the public from floodplain farming. Figure 5 shows a list of many of those [public benefits](#).

Ask your local floodplain farmer how much benefit his acre of GMO feed corn is providing the public. In reality, when all costs and impacts are accounted for, including the loss of those natural benefits, it likely costs the public for that floodplain farmer to raise their corn.

ECOSYSTEM SERVICES

SUPPORTING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nutrient Cycling • Soil Formation • Primary Production 	PROVISIONING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food • Fresh Water • Wood and Fiber • Fuel
	REGULATING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Climate Regulation • Food Regulation • Disease Regulation • Water Purification
	CULTURAL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aesthetic • Spiritual • Educational • Recreational

LIFE ON EARTH - BIODIVERSITY

Source: Adapted from Millenium Ecosystem Assessment

Figure 5: The Value of Ecosystem Services

truth is that politicians who represent those floodplain farmers and CPMR use their influence to propagandize against the Missouri River restoration work while ignoring the best interests of everyone else. They need to get back to representing the public.

It is impossible to properly recover these species without restoring an adequate portion of their habitat and returning the physical characteristics of the river itself to a condition that accommodates their ability to survive. It will take the acquiring tens of thousands more

So, Senators and Representatives who are not Missouri River ecologists and pallid sturgeon biologists and who are trying to defund the river restoration process, please defer to those true science experts. Your uninformed opinions regarding how long it takes and how much land and habitat alteration is required for species to recover are less than helpful. You are undermining the process with special-interest-influenced positions.

What needs to be done?

Please ask your senators and representatives to support full funding for all Missouri River programs.

You might scratch you head when you hear about Missouri and Nebraska federal legislators criticizing the progress and funding of the very program Congress authorized to restore nearly 167,000 of those lost half million acres. The unfortunate

floodplain acres costing hundreds of millions of dollars – our assumed and very necessary penitence for the huge mistake of another generation.



Figure 6: Pallid Sturgeon in Missouri River

Source: US Fish and Wildlife Service

for all Missouri River programs.

<http://www.moenvironment.org/brad-blog/221-a-river-of-special-interests-entitlement>

Attacking the recovery of the pallid sturgeon in the context of animals versus people is ignorant and counter-productive. It either 1) reveals how little opponents understand the restoration process while concurrently ignoring how utterly dependent humans are upon healthy natural areas or 2) exposes their greed and illuminates their exaggerated perception of the value of their own endeavors. This political maneuvering is solely to protect the heavily subsidized, environmentally damaging behavior of the floodplain farmers at the expense of everyone else.

We need you to contact your [senators](#) and [representatives](#) and ask them to support full funding