

# Mississippi River Levee 100-year protection project nears finish

May 14 2016 1:30 PM



**EDWARDSVILLE** – As the reconstruction of the levees that protect more than 155,000 people and 5,000 businesses from the waters of the Mississippi River nears completion and will be certified to withstand a 100-year flood, the \$100 million spent to improve the levee system is being hailed as one of the largest and most successful projects in Southwestern Illinois in decades.

But confusion regarding funding for the levee rehabilitation arose following a story by a local news outlet that inaccurately reported that more than \$20 million in federal government funding was re-programmed by the Corps of Engineers to a different project and may be lost.

The Southwestern Illinois Flood Prevention District Council responded by stating the funding is not lost, but will simply be appropriated in a different year for the multi-year project.

According to **Chief Supervisor of Construction Chuck Etwert**, in 2015 the Flood Prevention District Council asked the Corps of Engineers to use funds budgeted in that fiscal year for the repair of the levee adjacent to the Mel Price Lock and Dam in Alton that was damaged by the construction of the Lock and Dam. The Corps had already programmed the funds for other projects that are part of the overall \$450 million levee rehabilitation project for the 74-mile levee system that protects Southwestern Illinois.

The Corps, citing a bureaucratic regulation that kept it from spending funds earmarked for one section of the levee system on a different section, chose to transfer the funds to projects outside of the region rather than apply the funds toward repairing the levee adjacent to the lock and dam. “A congressional legislative fix to the regulation is being pursued” Etwert said.

“Repairs on the levee at the lock and dam, estimated at \$30 million, are entirely the responsibility of the Corps of Engineers,” continued Etwert. “It is the weak link in our 74-mile levee system and is not at 100-year flood protection levels.”

“On numerous occasions, members of the Flood Prevention District Council spoke with Corps of Engineers’ officials and asked them to utilize their funds to correct the levee issue at the Mel Price Lock and Dam, a problem created by the Corps. In 2009, the levee at the lock and dam was identified by the Corps as an emergency area that requires an interim operation plan of flood fighting with an estimated cost of \$1 million each time the river rises above flood stage,” Etwert said.

Etwert said the re-programming of the funds by the federal government has not caused a delay in the project and the Flood Prevention District Council is completing the same levee rehabilitation projects targeted by the Corps of Engineers with local funds generated by a quarter-cent sales tax in place in Madison, Monroe and St. Clair counties. Local funds were used to pay for the 100 Year rehabilitation and will match federal funds for the 500 year construction work.

Local Funds spent on the project will be credited toward the 35 percent federal match. “We have an agreement with the Corps of Engineers on how to move forward with rehabilitating the levees to the 500-year flood level using local funds. The money spent will count toward the federal match requirement, so no funds will be lost,” Etwert said.

As a result of the Flood Prevention District continuing its construction activity, completion of the project will not be delayed in any manner. Funds generated locally

have covered more than \$100 million in improvements to the flood prevention system, improvements which in 2017 will result in the certification of the levee system for 100-year flood protection levels.

“Congress has authorized rehabilitating the levees to a 500-year protection level, and the federal government has committed to providing 65 percent of the funding for that portion of the project,” Etwert continued.

Because the Corps is responsible for 100 percent of the Mel Price Lock and Dam Levee Deficiency and 65 percent of the other project costs, these funds are obligated to be appropriated to the project in future years. “We have the full support of our congressional delegation and are confident the federal funds will continue to be appropriated to the project. There will not be a loss of revenue to the region, or to this project,” Etwert stated emphatically.

Ron Motil, president of the Southwestern Illinois Flood Prevention District Council said there were a number of issues that had to be addressed with the Corps of Engineers for the 500- year project to proceed, including the use of local workers on the project. “The majority of the funding to rehabilitate the levees comes from a 0.25 cent sales tax which was approved by the three counties which comprise the Flood Prevention District Council.”

“**Madison County Chairman Alan Dunstan** was adamant that since local tax dollars were funding the project, local workers should get the jobs, not out-of-state workers brought in by contractors,” Motil said. “Chairman Dunstan said this was a promise local leaders made to taxpayers when it proposed the sales tax. The Flood Prevention District Council Board agreed with the chairman, and that has been our formal position since the project began in 2012.”

At the center of the issue is the Corps of Engineers’ interpretation of federal procurement regulations which the corps claimed prohibits it from mandating project labor agreements. Dunstan, however, said a Presidential Executive Order permits such agreements and studies show they add value to the project in terms of worker productivity and safety.

Importantly, the Flood Prevention District Council and the Corps of Engineers have resolved the issue. The Corps of Engineers has approved a Best Value Tradeoff Approach procurement method and will evaluate the use of project labor agreements on a case-by-case basis.

The project has been a huge success story for Southwestern Illinois. Following passage of the National Levee Safety Act and faced with the levees being decertified by the

Federal Emergency Management Agency, an action which would have resulted in exorbitant increases in flood insurance premiums and which would have been devastating to economic development efforts, officials in Madison, St. Clair and Monroe counties established the Southwestern Illinois Flood Prevention District Council to oversee the rehabilitation of the levees.

Motil said the actions of area officials to initiate the levees rehabilitation averted a crisis which would have negatively impacted the entire region. “Not only would decertification of the levees impact our area’s economy, but if the levees were not repaired it could have put thousands of residents in danger.”