



# Water Woes on the Mississippi

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Water woes that at one time only affected the arid regions of the western United States and remote third world countries are now impacting the citizen of the Mississippi River Valley. At first we experienced a small inconvenience, a foul odor or acrid taste to our drinking water, then quite suddenly a threat to the navigational life line for our agricultural and industrial raw materials and harvested goods.

The congressionally mandated 9 foot navigation channel on the Mississippi River, which moves 325 tons of cargo annually, is now adversely impacted by low water due to the persistent midcontinent drought. The Army Corp of Engineers has begun removal of rock pinnacles 150 miles downstream at Thebes in the hopes of gaining a couple of inches of temporary navigational dept.

While the drought's impact on navigation is quite rightly a topic of national discourse we are ignoring a much bigger issue. Are we applying short term fixes in the stead of long term solutions? In the culture of cost/ benefit and cost recovery there is no language to address the (super) wicked problem of climate change, and no matter if it is simply cyclical or induced by human activity it is upon us.

Missouri River states' lawmakers, unified by the spring flooding in 2011, are now deeply divided on the issue of releasing waters from reservoirs on the upper Missouri to help assuage the Great River's navigational shortfall. The Corp's master manual mandates retaining these reservoirs for a 12 year drought~ the duration of the 1930's Dust Bowl~, at present it is estimated that 20% of the storage has already been spent. At the same time North Dakota's gas and oil industry is allowed to siphon off, free of charge, as much as 30,000 acre feet of water annually from these same reserves.

The barge industry is touting the potential loss of 20,000 jobs, undeliverable fertilizer from the south to the agricultural producers in the mid and upper Mississippi River regions and crude oil supplies cut off from refiners. The low water levels may also block the transportation of global grain and fossil fuel exports. The industry is asking lawmakers to fully fund the approximately \$10 million blasting contract to remove as

much as 6,700 cubic yards of bedrock at Thebes, Il and any other projects deemed necessary to keep navigation lanes open.

Although there is much uncertainty as to the duration of the drought, other recent weather events from Katrina to Sandy, western wildfires, global heat waves and flooding, and the melting of polar ice should serve as a harbinger to all, including our policy makers. We can no longer afford the hyperbolic discount that our society applies to issues involving the environment.

We as a society must examine how we use our recourses; while it is true that we need water to move barges, *it is possible to move that same cargo without water*. In many parts of the world vessels are designed to conform to the river's features as opposed to engineering rivers to accommodate tows. The most basic condition of water is to sustain plant and animal life. As with other issues of environmental concern there is no simplistic or straightforward approach to solving these problems. Solutions can appear costly in the short term for uncertain future benefits but we as individuals incur such risk in many ways in our daily lives. As the primary stakeholders in the environment we must insist that our elected officials lay down their partisan agenda in order to devise policy based on science, the value of ecosystem services and sustainable energy infrastructure. Governing by such policy may not only avert the number and frequency of disasters in which FEMA and the Corp are called to but may also forge the frame work for a new sustainable economy and work force.