



# Levee Construction Project Completed Soon, Protects Against 500-Year Flood

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WOOD RIVER - The Wood River Drainage and Levee District (WRDLD) is nearing completion of a major levee project along Illinois Route 143 that aims to protect Riverbend communities from the 500-year flood.

The Wood River Levee System Reconstruction Project is a collaboration between WRDLD, the [U.S. Army Corps of Engineers \(USACE\)](#) and the [Southwestern Illinois Flood Prevention District Council \(FPD Council\)](#). The project aims to repair and reinforce flooding infrastructure throughout the area.

“There actually is a completion date, finally,” Kevin Williams, WRDLD executive director, said. “This project on 143 should be complete by the end of the calendar year, 2023. So, just in a few months. It’s right around the corner.”

The most recent construction started in 2021, but conversations about the Wood River Levee System Reconstruction Program really began in 2007 when the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) announced they would withdraw accreditation from the levee system that served the Metro East. They made this decision because parts of the levee weren’t up to FEMA standards.

Without their accreditation, the levee would not be eligible to participate in FEMA's National Flood Insurance Program or qualify for USACE funding under Public Law 84-99. This means there would be no federal funds available if the levee failed; taxpayers would be responsible for funding clean-up and reconstruction.

"We had a lot of deficiencies within our system here," Chuck Johansen, WRDLD president, said. "If we weren't eligible and there was a major break, it'd be on our dime and the taxpayers' dime."

To prevent the disaccreditation, Madison, Monroe and St. Clair Counties formed the FPD Council. They partnered with WRDLD and USACE and began repairing the levee system to return it to FEMA and USACE requirements. The levee system is still accredited today because of these efforts.

One of the main improvements involved preparing the levee for the hypothetical 100-year flood. In other words, the levee needed to be able to withstand the worst flooding event that could happen in a century.

"It reduces the flood risk for a flood that has a 1% chance of occurrence," Williams explained. "They call it the 100-year flood, but it can happen anytime. There's just a 1% chance of it happening in a year."

These hypotheticals basically help prepare for worst-case scenario flooding levels. For context, the record-setting flood in 1993 was a 330-year event. While the levee is no longer at risk of being disaccredited, the groups continue to make improvements. Today's construction on IL-143 aims to prepare the levee for the 500-year flood, which has a .2% chance of happening in any year.

"It still has a chance to happen in consecutive years, it just normally doesn't," Williams said. "We've never had a 500-year event. I hope we never do."

But just in case, the levee will be ready. Over the past few years, the USACE has designed and constructed 46 additional relief wells from Alton to Columbia, IL, which helps relieve pressure on the levee so it doesn't collapse. They've also worked to install additional pump stations and minimize the risk of groundwater seepage. All of these measures are efforts to keep the levee standing in the event of a 500-year flood.

"The project you drive past here every day is 100% federally funded. There is no local cost match on that, so local taxpayers aren't paying for it," Williams said. He added that the USACE funded the project and administered the contract, so they're overseeing the project.

Meanwhile, WRDLD is out in the field and taking care of the area. Johansen and Williams explained that they have done a lot of work to avoid disrupting the environment more than necessary. For every one tree they cut down, three new trees are planted nearby. They have met with the local chapter of the [Sierra Club](#) to talk through other ways to mitigate damage, including how to keep wildlife safe.

“The eagles are safe and nesting,” Johansen said. “When it comes to vegetation, we have a migrating bat that comes here, and everything has to stop or it has to be really inspected before they can take a tree.”

This is the Indiana bat, which nests in Illinois from March to October. If the district absolutely has to remove trees during this time, they work with another company to complete an environmental study and a thorough investigation to make sure there are no bats in the trees.

As this latest leg of the Wood River Levee Reconstruction Project nears completion, the WRDLD, USACE and FPD Council will continue to make improvements and prepare for future flooding events. Williams noted that everything they’re doing will eventually have to be updated, but much of this work will last “many lifetimes,” and construction will be finished soon.

“It’s right around the corner,” he said.

For more information on the levee’s health or flood prevention projects, visit the Wood River Drainage and Levee District’s [official website](#).



