Water control projects needed to stop floods

by Marcia Merry

As of May 24, residents who live along the Oachita River, which flows through Arkansas and Louisiana, were waiting for the flood crest from the rains of May 22. The adjacent, large watersheds of the Red River and the Arkansas River were still soaked from the torrential rains and floods earlier in May. The Trinity River, running from above Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas, down to the Gulf of Mexico through Galveston, had also raged over its banks in May.

On the weekend of May 19, President Bush visited Texas to witness the damage.

These disasters, and other water crises, should not be wreaking this havoc. If water development projects had not been abandoned in the last 30 years, millions of people, and the environment itself, would not be suffering as they are at present.

Look at the Trinity River floods in Texas. Damage to state agriculture is at least $1 billion. Regions affected by the flood produce 33% of the state's wheat, 66% of its oats, and 49% of its hay. At one point, 100,000 acres, half of it crop and pasture land, were under water.

At the worst time, Lake Livingston Dam, on the lower Trinity River, was discharging over 100,000 cubic feet per second, over five times the usual amount, and about half of the flow of Niagara Falls.

Flood control measures that could have prevented such disasters were proposed in the past, but never adopted. The Livingston Dam was completed in 1969 to form a lake that supplies water to Houston, not to control flooding. A flood control dam had been proposed in the early 1970s, and would have been built near Tennessee Colony, a small town southeast of Dallas. The estimated cost was $1 billion, about half the cost of a single Texas savings and loan bailout. The lake would have held 3.5 million acre feet of water, and would have been able to hold the flood surge created by the heavy rains, slowly releasing the water over the summer months.

Among the feeble excuses for not building the dam was the presence at the proposed lake site of large deposits of lignite coal—one of the lowest-grade fossil fuels.

Meanwhile, the north central states are experiencing drought and legal disputes over scarce water supplies, mostly focused on the waters of the Missouri River basin. There is severe drought in the upper Missouri River system (Montana, the Dakotas, and the Canadian prairie provinces). The governor of North Dakota in April requested official drought disaster status for his state. In the lower river system, there has been sufficient rainfall or even flooding in the areas bordering on the southern storm zone.

In between the dry and wet zones, there is a stretch of the "middle" Missouri River, from about Sioux City, Iowa down to the Missouri-Kansas line, where the river level has been low, and water control disputes between the "upstream" interests and the "downstream" people are occurring, fast and furious.

Conflicts between 'upstream' and 'downstream'

On May 9, U.S. District Judge Patrick Conmy in Bismarck, North Dakota, issued an order to the Army Corps of Engineers to reduce the amount of water it allows to pass out of the upper Missouri reservoirs. The judge's action was the result of a lawsuit filed by North and South Dakota and Montana, which want water held upstream for irrigation, fish, and other purposes.

In opposition, the U.S. Justice Department filed an appeal motion May 10, to have the order to withhold water reversed, and allow the release of water for people downstream. The action was filed technically on behalf of the Army Corps of Engineers, based on the argument that the Corps has to be "balanced" and provide water to all.

The same squaring-off has taken place on a smaller scale in Nebraska, over the flow of the Platte River—one of the tributaries of the Missouri. The farmers upstream need water for irrigation, for which Lake McConaughy stores water; environmentalists are demanding that water be released, for bird-breeding habitats downstream. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission is caught in the middle, issuing an order to release water earlier this year, then reversing itself in May.

Other areas of the West are also in strife over water shortages. Southern California has rationing in effect in many localities.

However, the Bush administration continues to cancel water projects and stop work in progress. The Bush budget proposal demands termination of construction on the Garrison Dam Diversion project on the upper Missouri River in North Dakota.

Groundbreaking for the $589 million Animas-LaPlata reservoir project in southwestern Colorado, originally scheduled for May 5, has been put on hold indefinitely by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Water would have been used for farmland irrigation and to supply Aurora, a suburb east of Denver.

A project whose blueprints were competed almost 30 years ago, called the North American Water and Power Alliance, would have averted this crisis. NAWAPA calls for diverting water from the MacKenzie River system in Canada's Yukon, which now flows into the Arctic Circle, southward along a Rocky Mountain trench, with supply channels throughout Canada's prairie provinces and the United States' Western farm states, all the way south to Mexico.