The mighty lessons of the Mississippi floods

by Marcia Merry

By the end of July, the crest of the epic flooding in the Mississippi-Missouri river basins may be over, but the still high river levels, and vast pools of water over millions of acres, will remain to remind the United States and the world: Build your economy, or else. Hydrological engineers view the floods as a once-in-500-years occurrence.

However, the spectacle of damage in the Midwest is not that of a thriving society suffering a momentous but temporary calamity. Rather, the pre-flood U.S. economy itself was a disaster, and no rebuilding plans are yet under discussion. In Florida, new tent cities are going up to house some of the thousands of people still homeless from Hurricane Andrew in 1991. The Mississippi-Missouri flooding is equivalent to multiple Hurricane Andrews across five states.

The combination of flooding and the decrepit U.S. economy has global strategic implications. First, consider the overall physical geography of the river basin. Then look at the strategic economic geography.

Vast devastation

The flooded area of the upper Mississippi-Missouri basins extends to over 100,000 square miles, out of the total drainage area of 1.244 million square miles—one of the most extensive river systems in the world. The Mississippi is ranked as the third longest river in the world, with an official length of 3,741 miles (after the Amazon and the Nile). In terms of volume of discharge, the Mississippi ranks seventh, with an annual average of 611 cubic feet per second at its mouth south of New Orleans. Rivers with greater flow include the Amazon, the Zaire, the Yenisey, the Yangtze, and the Ganges.

Last autumn, rains pelted the upper Missouri-Mississippi system, and saturated the ground. When more rains came this spring, the runoff was spectacular, and led to the July record floods. In mid-July, the crest at St. Louis was 45 feet—fully 15 feet over official flood level.

A 400-mile-plus stretch of the river has been closed to commercial traffic, from Dubuque to St. Louis. The famous "steps" of the 27 lock and dam series on the Mississippi, going southward for 669 miles down a 420-foot drop from Minneapolis to St. Louis, are shut down. Portions of railroads running north-south in the Mississippi Basin are likewise closed, and the east-west Amtrak lines across Iowa are closed periodically. Effectively, only three main bridge spans in the entire central Midwest are now safe to cross the Mississippi, and that may change soon.

The volume of water pouring down the Missouri-Mississippi main channels has created a vast lake covering almost the entirety of Charles County, Missouri, where the two rivers join north of St. Louis. At last count, 222 counties in the upper Mississippi-Missouri river system have been declared disaster areas, including in the states of South Dakota, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri.

All 99 counties are disaster areas in Iowa, whose borders are defined on the west by the Missouri River, and on the east by the Mississippi River. In Iowa's capital, Des Moines, over 250,000 people have been without safe water since the city's treatment plant was flooded on July 11. In Iowa's second largest city, Cedar Rapids, the sewage treatment plant is shut down. Downriver in Missouri, dozens of treatment plans are shut down and raw sewage is spewing into the riverflow.

At many points along the river channels, the floodwaters have punched holes in the levees, flooding millions of acres of towns, factories, and farmland.

Vast negligence

What could have been done? Plenty. It is indicative that on April 29, just two months prior to the flood emergency, the Army Corps of Engineers Board of Engineers for Rivers

and Harbors, the review board of navigation and river control projects, was disbanded. It was axed by a clause in the Water Resources Development Act of 1992 as a cost-cutting measure. This was the latest in a series of deadly cutbacks made in water infrastructure and management, especially under Presidents Carter and Reagan.

Under the original intent of Congress, the Army Corps of Engineers was mandated to develop and manage the river systems of the nation to provide the foundation for economic security—navigation, water supplies for domestic, industrial, and agricultural use, and for flood control. The greater Mississippi system itself, including the Ohio, Missouri, and other river systems that empty into the Mississippi Basin, is a fabulous asset to the North American continent—like a pulmonary system for the body of the economy. Of its hundreds of tributaries, which drain two Canadian provinces and 31 states, 45 rivers are navigable for at least 50 miles, providing a combined system of waterways—the least-cost mode of transport—of over 15,000 miles.

In recent years, federal policy shifted away from an overall management approach to these vast inland waterway resources, to a piecemeal approach or worse. The corps was instructed to "do the minimum." Moreover, it was left up to each town along the rivers and tributaries whether or not it would take any protective measures at all. The consequences are obvious. For example, the Mississippi River town of LaCrosse, Wisconsin decided not to build flood control. It was smashed. The river town of Davenport, Iowa decided not to build flood control. It was smashed. By contrast, Davenport's sister city of Bettendorf did build protective levees. It has less damage.

Because the scale of this great flood is so vast, some damage would have occurred regardless of advance preparations. However, if an overall management approach had been taken—levees where efficacious, side channels for spillover, dams wherever needed, utilities protected—the destruction would have been far less.

World food supply threatened

Besides the immediate damage to life and property, the consequences of the crop losses in this grain belt will be felt around the globe, because it has been commodities cartel policy in recent decades to use this region as the source of cartel-dominated world corn and soybeans exportable "surpluses."

The United States produces on average up to 45% of all the maize (corn) grown in the world each year. The region hit by the flooding accounts for *50% of the U.S. soybean and corn crop*. Therefore, whatever U.S. production ends up being knocked out, it is automatically knocked out of world food supplies. U.S. corn exports represent, on average, 80% of all world corn traded each year—and this is 99% controlled by the cartel that created the Midwest granary over the past 30 years.

The Midwest granary economy is the same geographical region that otherwise would have become the "forge" economy of the United States—a region defined roughly by the points of Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Chicago. This is where the predominant industrial capacity for producing machinery and capital goods for infrastructure, agriculture, industry, power, and transport was once located. Instead, over the past 30 years, this area was transformed into monoculture cropping.

The region hit by the flood disaster is the very same multistate region where the food cartel companies (Cargill, Archer Daniels Midland/Töpfer, Louis Dreyfus, Continental, ConAgra, and others) have enforced a relative monoculture of corn and soybean cultivation, for the purpose of dominating the processing and distribution of these crops and derived foodstuffs (vegetable oil; corn sucrose, now used in soft drinks; soybean meal, for livestock feed; corn ethanol; and "SoyDiesel"), while national interest-based food production was being suppressed the world over.

In the latest example of this suppression, European Community officials agreed to restrict their own oilseeds acreage output in deference to the U.S.-based cartels that insist on profiteering off soybeans originating in the United States. Now the U.S. soybean belt is under water! Even before the big floods, about 10% of the Midwest corn and bean acreage was ruined by wet fields in the early crop season, and either was not planted at all or rotted out. Now the crop losses will be spectacular.

Peripheral parts of the U.S. farm belt are also experiencing weather problems. The governor of South Carolina, for example, has designated his state an emergency because of drought, which extends into adjacent Georgia and North Carolina. Other parts of the world grain belt are also experiencing problems. For example, drought in Australia is at national crisis stage, and adverse weather is harming the soybean crop in South America.

Finally, the vulnerability of the Midwest economy to flood damage comes not only from fallen levees, but from decades of underpayment by the cartels to farmers, and the ripple effect of that throughout the community, including lack of infrastructure such as railroads, health facilities, and power grids, and the shutdown of independent industry and services.

Most citizens living in the floodplain stayed there because they had no means to move elsewhere because of the depression. All they may have owned was their home, and now that's gone. Insurance coverage is uncommon. Most private insurance does not cover flooding disasters of the Mississippi type, calling it an "act of God." In Illinois, perhaps only 25% of the crop was insured, and only that which was planted by a certain date. Farms, towns, and householders alike are so financially marginalized that they cannot withstand a disaster, or even one bad season, because they have no means to rebuild.