

Missouri River Floods Hit Food Supply; Obama/Vilsack to Farmers: No Aid

by Marcia Merry Baker

June 20—The Missouri River, for two-thirds of its 2,341-mile course, is now in full flood, with high-water conditions projected to last until at least mid-August. The river runs through the heart of the northern High Plains, one of the richest farm regions of the world. The river basin covers most of the U.S. Spring wheat belt, where wet and cold have severely retarded or ruined crops (**Figure 1**). More than 35% of the U.S. corn harvest is produced in the five-state region here (Iowa, Nebraska, Missouri, South Dakota, and North Dakota). The toll on farm fields is vast, diminishing this year's wheat, corn, soybeans, canola, barley, and other crops, and devastating livestock operations. The flooding also disrupts transportation and food processing.

This crop season's damage in the Missouri Basin, added to the agriculture losses from Spring flooding in the rest of the Mississippi and Ohio Basin, constitutes an automatic hit to the world food supply, given the export share of basic grains produced in the United States.

Yet the latest Obama snub to the population—meaning, all those who eat food—comes from Obama's Agriculture Secretary, Tom Vilsack, who toured the flood zone in western Iowa and eastern Nebraska, June 16-17, and said nothing can be done. He told farmers, Washington is cutting disaster aid: "I'm having my department budget cut by 13% today, and after talking with members of Congress yesterday, I would say chances are slim that more money will be made available for disaster or [agriculture] insurance programs."

This was capped off by Obama's chummy golf game June 18, with the "opposition" leader John Boehner (R-Ohio), Speaker of the House, whose party likewise is saying: There's no money. We can't do anything.

In apparent contrast, obligatory statements of concern were issued last week by Congressional figures from the flood states, who visited several of their deluged counties, including Sen. Mike Johanns (R-Neb.), Sen. Charles Grassley (R-Iowa), Rep. Joanne Emerson (R-Mo.) and others. But they display two dismal reflex reactions when it comes to policy: 1) blame-game criti-

cism of the Army Corps of Engineers; and 2) pin-head agreement on budget cuts in Washington, for agriculture, food aid, and disaster relief.

What's busting up this immorality is the national drive to reinstate the Franklin Roosevelt-era Glass-Steagall banking law, under whose principle and practices, credits can be issued for both emergency measures and longer-term agro-industrial development. The immediate necessity is for food price controls, to ban the wild commodity speculation—a hallmark of the expiring monetarist system, falsely blamed on "weather"—and to secure the functioning of farm and food supply lines.

Scale of Damage to Agriculture

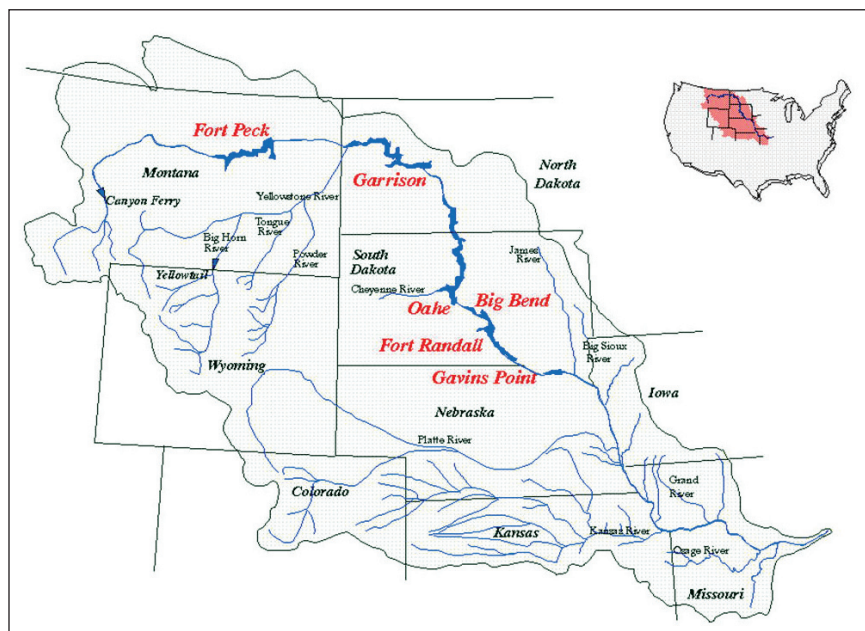
There are 2 million or more agricultural acres affected in the Missouri Basin as a whole, some from standing water, some from saturated ground, and/or unseasonably cold temperatures. The Iowa Farm Bureau estimates that 150,000 acres of Iowa farm fields will be under water, and the crops drowned, as a direct consequence of the Missouri River system flooding. (The state has 24 million acres under cultivation, in fields draining either to the Missouri or Mississippi rivers.)

On June 30, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is to release a farmer survey-based estimate of crop losses. But unless that report blatantly lies, it will only verify what can be inferred from this year's weather map.

The pattern shows that the Missouri Basin agriculture disaster comes at the same time as extreme weather and farm losses in the Ohio Valley, the Lower Mississippi River flooding, and the fierce drought in the South. This makes the Missouri Basin flooding both a national and international food supply crisis.

Look at the continental cornbelt, in particular, which extends from Ohio in the East, all the way westward through Nebraska. Both East and West have significant crop problems. Corn planting in Ohio, for the week ended June 12, was only 57% done, compared to an av-

FIGURE 1
Missouri River Basin



erage of 97% by this date, according to the *USDA Crop Progress*. And the condition of the seeded fields in Ohio remains far worse than last year.

Back in the Missouri Basin, the Spring wheat belt was devastated in Montana and North Dakota.

Added to the drastic impacts on grain, livestock operations are badly affected throughout the region. Some farmers have lost animals outright to floods. All farmers face high feed costs, re-location costs, and many have damaged or destroyed farm buildings.

Flood Control Lacking; High Water Persists

The *Bismarck Tribune*, the daily paper of the flooded capital of North Dakota, located directly on the Missouri River, ran an article June 19 in which Clay Jenkinson, a professor at Dickinson State University and Bismarck State College, identified the scale of the crisis: “The simple fact is that this is a gargantuan (I almost wrote titanic) water year in the Missouri-Mississippi basin, from Dillon, Montana, to Memphis and New Orleans.

“The Corps of Engineers is desperately trying to maintain control of one of the biggest water episodes on the fourth longest river in the world, the 10th most powerful, a clogged and waterlogged drainage basin that collects the runoff of all or part of 31 states and two Canadian provinces. The Missouri-Mississippi basin embraces fully 41 percent of the continental United States.

It’s on the rampage this year. The Corps is doing everything to minimize the damage from Helena and Bozeman [Montana] to New Orleans, a distance of 3,709 miles. It’s a long war on many fronts, and there is going to be some collateral damage, including here in North Dakota.”

Two features of extreme weather phenomena are involved in the Missouri River Basin flooding: 1) the melt-off of the very heavy snowpack in the Rockies; and 2) persistent rains in the Missouri watershed. The National Weather Service warns of more rainstorms ahead.

The focus at present is on the mid-Missouri, which is now in its 14th day of flooding. Going from north to south, where the Missouri River comes down through South Dakota, thence proceeding southward as the

border between Nebraska and Iowa, the river is three feet above flood stage at Sioux City, Iowa/South Sioux City, Nebraska; then it rises to four feet above flood stage in Omaha, Nebraska/Council Bluffs, Iowa, and then farther south; where the river enters the state of Missouri, it is eight feet above flood level, near Hamburg, Iowa. Here, the main levee gave way June 13, and the town (most of its 1,100 residents have evacuated), is now protected by a secondary levee, built in haste just this past week by National Guard and Army Corps of Engineers troops.

In general, the high water level of the Missouri will be about three feet above flood stage for weeks, with local fluctuations. In the second half of June, the flood stage will be reached on its southernmost course through the state of Missouri. For example, June 22 is the target date for when its level will be above flood stage in the state capital at Jefferson City, according to the National Weather Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Only the Upper Missouri River flood-control system has major flood-control structures. There are six main-stem dams from Montana to South Dakota, but none in the stretch down to St. Louis, where the Missouri joins the Mississippi. Below the southernmost Gavins Point Dam (near Yankton, S.D.), flood control depends only on non-systematic levees, many built by the Army Corps

of Engineers, but often dependent on localities for their upkeep, and often neglected for want of resources.

All the upper six dam reservoirs are swollen full; the Corps is monitoring the rate of flow of the water release at each installation daily. There is a balancing act between holding water back to protect localities downstream, and the need to release it because the impoundments are too full. For example, at the Garrison Dam in North Dakota, the lake level on June 12 was 1,853.3 feet, and the top of the dam's spillway gates is 1,854 feet! The dam has far exceeded the volume of water it released in the past, and shortly will be at 230% of its former record amount of water released!

Localities Scramble

On June 14, the Gavins Point Dam was releasing water at the huge rate of 150,000 cubic feet per second. The feared consequence of this, downstream at the chokepoint of Sioux City (where the Big Sioux River

joins the Missouri), was expected to be very high flood waters. This, fortunately, did not happen, for two main reasons: First, the river is scouring its own channel in this stretch, which allows for carrying off greater volumes of water. (This also increases the siltload downstream, for which the Army Corps has not been given funding for dredging!)

Secondly, the levee break near Hamburg is allowing so much water to escape throughout the countryside, that the back-up is lessened up-river. In effect, Omaha and Sioux City gained at the expense of Hamburg.

Thus, there is a kind of each-against-all mode in play, because there is no system-wide capability for water management. The Pick-Sloan 1940s Missouri River Basin Project was never completed, especially in the Lower Missouri.¹ "We are kind of pushing the water

1. For more on the Pick-Sloan Plan, see *EIR*, June 10, 2011 (<http://www.larouchepub.com>).

Innovative Technique To Hold Back Flood Waters

This scene, at Covington Golf Course, in South Sioux City, Neb., shows the construction of a flood wall June 15, against Missouri River water, using 4-foot-high Styrofoam forms for the concrete, devised by LiteForm Technologies. Here, the concrete fill-process is taking place amidst the flood waters; after 16 hours of pumping, the protected side was dry, and the new levee defended against the flood on the other side. The wall structures have pick holes, so that when water recedes, the levee can be dismantled by machinery lifting out the sections, as easily as removing highway bollards.

Pat Boeshart, CEO of LiteForm, based in Sioux City, innovated the technology and

founded the firm in 1986; he has constructed building foundations all over the nation, but now is working flat-out on local flood walls. The forms are built offsite. The levee can be erected in a day.

Earlier in June, the town of South Sioux City had two temporary levees built, one by the Army Corps of Engineers, and the secondary one, which is a 2,500-ft.-dike, by the LiteForm Styrofoam/concrete method. It was done in seven hours, for a total cost of \$24,000.



Boeshart, LiteForm Technologies



U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

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around, to protect ourselves and hurt someone else,” is the way one Sioux City emergency levee-builder critiqued the situation.

Local sites are scrambling to put in flood protection, site-by-site, for power plants, food-processing facilities, schools, prisons, water-treatment plants, hotels, government buildings, etc. Work teams are in action from the National Guard, church and community volunteers, prison inmates, etc.

Flood damage to key links in the Plains roadway system is creating havoc for supply lines for towns, factories, and food processing. Interstate 29, which runs north-south east of the Missouri River, from Canada to Kansas City, Mo., is interrupted in at least two places, one near Council Bluffs, and the other in northwest Missouri. Brenda Neville, president of the Iowa Motor Truck Association, representing 700 companies, said that the disruption of this corridor is having a “dramatic impact.” The detours are costly. The Iowa Department of Transportation has warned that sections of I-29 might be closed for two months. The state has set up a motor vehicle hotline, to attempt to redirect road traffic.

Get Serious: Glass-Steagall

On June 14, an additional funding measure—an eye-dropper amount of \$1 billion—for the Army Corps of Engineers, was passed by the House of Representatives Appropriations Committee, “to repair damage caused by recent storms and floods and to prepare for future disaster events” on the Missouri/Mississippi. Although the measure has more hurdles to pass, its approval came as a kind of admission of reality, in the midst of the budget-cutting insanity.

Likewise, internationally, there is a re-guarded feint toward reality. In the countdown to this week’s Paris meeting of the agriculture ministers of the Group of 20, there are statements issuing forth about the need to curb food speculation, and slap commodity-exchange players on the wrist.

Get serious. The only hope to carry out urgent short- and long-term emergency measures for farming and the food supply, lies with the mobilization to reinstate the Glass Steagall law in the United

States. The Federal government can issue the credits, grants, and programs to restore and secure farming, farm communities, and provide for the food supply.

Immediately required, are price controls all along the food chain. As it is, the weekly USDA *Crop Progress* reports merely serve as the occasion for a speculative binge in agro-commodities on the Chicago Board of Trade.

Meantime, people are hurting. There are now 40.6 million Americans on domestic food relief, more than ever in history. They receive a minimal food stipend from the Agriculture Department’s SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), whose funding Obama and his loyal opposition plan to cut.

People are buying and eating less. In April, U.S. meat consumption was 6% less than April 2010, and the lowest in 10 years. Beef and pork were 8% less this April, than last.

Prices are climbing, and set for take-off. Grocery shoppers paid 4% more for a basket of 16 basic food items in May, compared with February, according to a quarterly poll taken by the American Farm Bureau, which tracks 72 shoppers in 30 cities. Year over year, the increase was more than 8%.