



Corps, levee district butt heads (again)

Local officials frustrated on recent levee shaving

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"Pre-flood condition" was, for several months after the historic 2008 disaster, one of the most grating phrases to Henderson County, Ill., drainage district trustees. Now, it's one word: original.

For the past couple days, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers contracts have been shaving inches -- trustees estimate about a foot -- off the Henderson County levee, just south of the Great River Bridge.

The reason is because the levee exceeds the level it was built, according to Rock Island District corps spokesman Ron Fournier.

Gun-shy and still recovering from the 2008 Flood, drainage district trustees say the corps' timing is plain bad, as spring flooding is on the way.

"You hate to scrape your levees now if you don't have to, because it's kind of like a scab, you might say. It'll bleed through a lot easier now," said Scott Walters, a Henderson County No. 1 drainage district trustee.

Fournier said shaving about a half mile of levee ultimately will make it stronger. He said the contractors, L.W. Matteson Inc., will bring the levee to its original level while also strengthening it by filling in wave-wash erosion that created crevices on the river side of the berm.

"You can sit and be upset about it, or you can, I guess, just take it, because there's nothing we can do about it," Walters said. "It's sounds absurd that the levee kind of is being pushed down, in front of possible record waters again."

Walters said it feels like the corps, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Illinois Department of Natural Resources are working against the drainage districts at a time when they need the levee protection most.

"We're hoping and praying there is no problem, but it's hard to sleep again at night," Walters said.

Original intent

Mark Ford, a drainage district trustee on Henderson County No. 2, said he was surprised to learn the corps knew the original height of the levee as he had asked for it and was told it was archived and unavailable.

Trustees also are surprised to learn the corps had to put the levee back at its original level, as opposed to its pre-flood condition, since county residents face losing their FEMA flood insurance status because of the levee's condition. Trustees had hoped the corps would simply build the levee higher.

Instead, they were told, the corps couldn't do any more than return it to pre-flood conditions under Public

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John Lovretta/The Hawk Eye
A bulldozer moves a foot of material Wednesday from an Illinois levee near the Great River Bridge.

Law 84-99.

According to the law, "The term repair and rehabilitation ... means the repair or rebuilding of a levee or other flood control structure, after the structure has been damaged by a flood, to the level of protection provided by the structure before the flood," but it doesn't include improvements or rebuilding if the structure is no longer fit to protect to the scale it was designed for.

Fournier said Wednesday, though, as part of the P.L. 84-99 program, levees must be returned to their original design.

He said during previous flood fights, the drainage districts, rightfully pushed up the levee higher for added protection. But where the levee did not break or overtop, the corps would not repair it, so the build-up wasn't noticed until the 2008 breach, Fournier said.

Fournier said the corps was able to get an exemption to leave a foot beyond the original design by using the specifications provided in the more recent National Levee Database, but it was required to shave off the rest to bring it to the permissible level.

"It's not that we're trying to eliminate their flood protection," Fournier said. "We're not treating them any differently than we've treated every single levee system that we did repairs to since '08."

Ford said, though, he thinks it would have been better for the drainage district to keep the sand on top of its levee for future flood push-ups and instead dredge the river to fill in the wave-wash erosion.

Beside losing sand, the trustees fear the lowered levee will hurt their chances of keeping their FEMA certification.

Fournier said, though, the trustees know that if they want to continue to be a part of the P.L. 84-99 program and get federal aid after flooding -- repairs on Henderson Nos. 1 and 2 cost \$11.2 million -- they cannot raise the levee without the corps' and other agencies' OK. He also assured that if the shaving made it any less safe, engineers would catch it.

"We will be sending our survey crew to the project site to verify elevations within the repair area within the next seven to 10 days to ensure the current levee elevation is within the required contract specifications and tolerances," Fournier said in an e-mail.