



News Release

**US Army Corps
of Engineers**
Northwestern Division
Public Affairs Office

1616 Capitol Avenue
Omaha, Nebraska 68102

Contact: Paul Johnston
(402) 995-2416
Larry Cieslik
(402) 996-3840

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paul.t.johnston@usace.army.mil

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Missouri River Spring Pulses

Opinion

By BG William Rapp

Northwestern Division Commander

Adapting to change is a hallmark of the people in America's Heartland. Changes in technology and markets lead to new techniques and products. Trading posts became towns and towns became great cities. And the Missouri River changed from a thing to be feared to a tremendous economic engine. In the process, hundreds of thousands of acres of water and shorelines that served as habitat for birds and fish were transformed into farmland that helps feed the nation and the world.

The river is changing again to help protect, and even recover, several species of fish and birds whose very existence is at risk – the pallid sturgeon, least tern and piping plover. The challenge is to bring about changes that help these species while maintaining the benefits to people of the work done over the past 75 years.

One of the ways that biologists believe will help the endangered pallid sturgeon is to pulse extra water into the river in March and May to provide spawning cues. These pulses mimic the historic river rises that resulted from the melting of the snow on the plains in March and April followed by another rise from the melting snow in the mountains in May and June. This is the condition the fish adapted to over tens of thousands of years. But those conditions changed with the construction of the dams and reservoirs on the Missouri River. Through aggressive scientific monitoring of the environment and sturgeon population we will be able to determine the impact of these pulses on recovery of this species.

The Army Corps of Engineers is committed to doing its part to help the pallid sturgeon, while at the same time fulfilling our century-old commitment to protecting human health and safety. Given our proven record of fighting floods alongside our community partners, the Corps is certainly not in the business of causing flooding. We will provide pulses this year in both March and May while limiting additional risk to bottomland farmers to as close to zero as possible. The Corps expects that, as in May 2006 and March 2008, there will not be any flood damage as a result of the 2009 pulses.

The two-day March pulse will not exceed the normal full-service navigation flows that the basin has seen many times prior to this latest drought. The May pulse will be somewhat higher than these normal navigation flows. We realize that weather conditions can change rapidly. Therefore, we will carefully monitor the actual runoff and rain forecasts and will adjust our river forecasts to include the most current information.

The Corps has access to data from hundreds of stream gauges providing near-real time information via satellite. If conditions change and our forecasts indicate that any of the downstream flow limits would be exceeded – and thus raise the potential for flooding -- the releases for the pulses will be reduced or eliminated.

We see opportunities for both the people and the ecosystem of the Missouri River basin. We have opportunities to make some changes to the river to help protected fish and birds while maintaining the many benefits being enjoyed by people right now, all in an atmosphere of unprecedented public participation. We should act collaboratively to seize those opportunities.

Brigadier General William E. Rapp is the commander of the Northwestern Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. He oversees a combined program of more than \$3.4 billion in civil works, environmental restoration, and military construction in 14 states. A key component of his responsibilities is the operation of the major dams and reservoirs within the Missouri River and Columbia River basins.