

Missouri River Part II: Flow Change Fight

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(Brad Penner/Reporting) Most of the time, the Missouri River along Nebraska's eastern border is a wide, deep channel full of fast-moving water. But it wasn't always that way.

(Chad Smith/American Rivers) The Missouri River is a very characteristic of a big river in that it had these natural ebb and flow pulses of water, higher flow in the spring and lower flow in the summer. That kind of natural dynamic was really the heartbeat of the Missouri.

(Brad Penner/Reporting) Chad Smith wants to revive that heartbeat. He grew up in Nebraska, and now works for American Rivers, an organization dedicated to restoring river environments. Smith says the Corps of Engineers managed the Missouri to provide enough water for navigation, and in the process stopped the river's heartbeat.

(Chad Smith/American Rivers) We don't have it because the Corp's first or main dam operation plan that was written in 1960 cut out all those natural flows, so then for about the past 15 years, we've all been wrangling over how to possibly change that dam operation plan and from our standpoint, the Corp finalized a new plan this year in the spring of 2004 and it basically is pretty much of a status quo. They did not include any more normal flow or more natural flows in the long-term management of the river and nothing higher in the spring, nothing lower in the summer.

(Brad Penner/Reporting) Paul Johnston with the Army Corps of Engineers says they haven't ruled out changes in river flows, but they aren't ready to change anything yet.

(Paul Johnston/U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) We're gonna spend the next two years looking at one of the most contentious issues we've had to deal with over the years on developing a new plan and that is what's called the spring rise which means additional water in the springtime followed by low flows in the summertime. And what we want to do is learn a lot more about the needs of the pallid sturgeon in particular, but also the least terns and the piping plovers, then use that knowledge to come up with a plan that we can work with. All the people in the basin and all those different and conflicting interests to see if we can come up with a plan that will help the species, and still let people enjoy the many benefits of the river, and that's gonna take us about two years to do that.

(Chad Smith/American Rivers) Now the Corps is going around saying, we're still going to try to do that and we're gonna think through the best way to do that over the next couple of years. Based on past history of the Corp, and them trying to find any way they can to get out of flow changes and to always try to push back and find other ways to do things, I'm not confident that they're going to go ahead and do that in the year 2006 assuming the water conditions are right.

(Brad Penner/Reporting) A couple of years ago, it looked like the concept of a spring rise and summer fall would be adopted as part of the management plan for the Missouri river. But late last year, the Corps of Engineers asked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to review a biological opinion used to help determine that plan. In December, a new biological opinion put more emphasis on habitat construction, and less on flow changes.

(Chad Smith/American Rivers) There was no new information that said in the year 2003 we should make different flow recommendations. And so you start to think about well maybe this has political motives behind it. And then you read the new 2003 biological opinion, we still have not had laid before us a clear path showing here is the new information that said, you know, we need to have not so low a flows in the summer or we maybe don't need to do em at all. I think there is more to that than science because at least to us and to other biologists on the river, that case hasn't been made out to us.

(Brad Penner/Reporting) Mike Olson worked on the new biological opinion. He supervises programs along the entire Missouri river for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In the past, he's favored changing flows on the river to improve conditions for endangered species. He says the plan in place now isn't a dramatic change.

(Mike Olson/U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service) There has been concern that somehow politics has played a bigger role in the Fish & Wildlife Services actions in the last few years, but I think that if you read the 2003 amended biological opinion, it reinforced the central concepts of the 2000 opinion and this idea of change is a big one in this basin. Anytime folks see what they believe is a change occurring, they get a little anxious. I think the Fish & Wildlife Service has always remained committed to this belief that in order for this system to function normally, that it's going to take a combination of physical habitat restoration and flow restoration. And into the future, those are both incredibly important concepts and biological drivers. The question or the debate over the years has been the sequencing of those two. Which one should we do first. How much of one should we do first. And we seem to have in place today, 2004, a plan for physical habitat changes for the next couple of years and coupling that with some of this hydrological modification as early as 2006 to see exactly what kind of benefit we can accrue.

(Brad Penner/Reporting) Barge operators have historically opposed the concept of flow changes on the Missouri, especially the idea of reducing summer flows. They say low water in the summer would essentially kill the navigation business from Sioux City to Kansas City. The Corps of Engineers must balance the needs of navigation with other river uses covered by the Federal Flood Control Act of 1944.

(Paul Johnston/U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) When the dams and reservoirs were first authorized on the Missouri River, they were eight purposes authorized by Congress. Flood control, hydropower, irrigation, navigation, recreation, water supply, water quality, and fish and wildlife. And now, with the passage of the Endangered Species, that's another ball we have to kind of keep juggle. And so we try to balance all of those things.

(Brad Penner/Reporting) Barge operators would like to continue shipping products up and down the river. But uncertainty over management of the Missouri, plus the drought, led shippers to stay off the river north of Kansas City this summer. The facility at DeBruce grain in Nebraska City can load grain into barges or rail cars.

(Darin Hanson/DeBruce Grain) A more typical year is that we would end up shipping some barges of specialty grains, white corn would be one of them, and that's a typical year for us. And this past two years we have not done that.

(Brad Penner/Reporting) Hanson says hundred car trains make rail a more efficient transportation option much of the time. But river barges make sense under certain conditions, and he'd like to have that option available.

(Darin Hanson/DeBruce Grain) The more flexibility we have as an industry, the more competitive we can be. Not saying that barge or rail is the most competitive, but at times they are, depending on where you're going to go with your product.

(Brad Penner/Reporting) The amount of shipping on the Missouri has declined for nearly 30 years. Critics say the Corps of Engineers is propping up a dying industry by attempting to keep river levels high enough to support barges in the summer.

(Brad Penner/Reporting) Is navigation less of a concern now because of the endangered species issues as well as other environmental issues?

(Paul Johnston/U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) Well navigation remains an authorized purpose. And it's not within the authority of the Corp of Engineers to stop supporting it. Navigation versus environment is one element. We have lots of people on the reservoirs that would like to see navigation go away because they think if it went away, it would mean more water would be kept in the reservoirs.

(Brad Penner/Reporting) Lake Oahe normally extends from Pierre, South Dakota north to Bismarck, North Dakota, a distance of 231 miles. But drought has shrunk Oahe to record low levels. A lot of communities depend on visitors to the reservoirs to fuel their local economies. The drought has intensified the competition between groups with an interest in Missouri River policy.

(Paul Johnston/U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) Because you have people that are really fighting for their livelihoods on both ends. That people on the reservoirs want you know personal recreation, but you know there's a lot of people go up there go fishing and camping and boating and stuff and that brings a lot of money into their towns and into the state. You have farmers in Nebraska that are very concerned that if you do things, you're gonna help these other folks or help the species that they are going to be victimized that their cropland will be wet at a time when they can't get seeds in the ground or if they do, they'll be drowned out. It would be a lot easier if we didn't have such striking competition.

(Brad Penner/Reporting) American Rivers wants the Federal Eighth Circuit Court of appeals to order the Corps of Engineers to release more water from Gavins Point Dam in the spring, and less in the summer. But a ruling from the court is likely months away. In the meantime, a vision for the future of the Missouri River is taking shape. And there's a surprising amount of agreement. Chad Smith sees families picnicking on sandbars. Boaters and fishermen enjoying a summer day. He sees a slower, more natural river becoming an asset to communities along its banks.

(Chad Smith/American Rivers) Well right now, people really turn their backs on the Missouri, especially on the lower river because it's channelized, it's pinched down, it's deep and it's fast. A lot of people are simply afraid of it. And we need to have on a summer day people instead of going to a nearby lake or taking their boats and their money and going to other states, we need to have people out on the Missouri River. Recreation and tourism is a growing industry unlike something like navigation. And people are willing to spend lots of money to get out and enjoy recreation and to distribute that money in local communities and that's the tie that binds and that's the tie that can bind this river more closely to local communities.

(Brad Penner/Reporting) Smith says the Boyer Chute National Wildlife Refuge near Omaha is a good example of what's needed on the Missouri. The chute was restored about a decade ago. Deer roam the grasslands near the banks. A wide variety of birds and other native wildlife share the refuge too. Manager Bryan Schultz says they're planning more improvements as well.

(Bryan Schultz/Boyer Chute National Wildlife Refuge) We have several chutes and backwater areas we think we can restore now to provide additional habitat.

(Brad Penner/Reporting) Mike Olson calls Boyer Chute one of a string of pearls along the Missouri River.

(Mike Olson/U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service) No one that I'm aware of has said we should go back to what this river looked like at the time of Lewis & Clark. What we seem to be saying is that in certain areas, we believe restoration of these pearls along the string, the Missouri River, is an important concept to pursue. And if we have enough of these pearls from one end of the system to the other, that the native river species will survive and maintain themselves.

(Brad Penner/Reporting) Olson says the Fish & Wildlife Service is working with the Corps of Engineers on plans for building more habitat for endangered species and other wildlife.

(Mike Olson/U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service) The government seems to have turned a corner I think on the Missouri River away from discussion of reports and master manuals and biological opinions to actual implementation of projects. And now the beginning of monitoring of those projects to see if we're affecting the change we had hoped to see and

I think that that is a big difference between 2004 and where we've been for about the last 15 years. If we've turned that corner away from reports and documents to action.

(Brad Penner/Reporting) Casey Kruse with the Corps of Engineers is glad to be part of the effort to build new habitat for endangered species.

(Casey Kruse/U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) And whether this is the solution or whether it's part of the solution is yet to be proven, but certainly this is an effort on the ground to attempt to improve conditions for these species and I think that speaks a lot in and of itself is that there's work being done out here. There's care and concern. There's a recognition of the responsibility to these species and we're attempting to do something out here to benefit the species and at a minimum learn what we can do better to provide those things.

(Brad Penner/Reporting) Chad Smith says habitat construction is fine, but the spring rise and summer fall in river levels must be part of the plan.

(Casey Kruse/U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) You have to have places like Boyer Chute National Wildlife Refuge in the flood plain. You have to try to create those connections between a main channel and the flood plain. That's good work that needs to be done and we need to spend money and time and effort doing that, but any river biologist worth his or her salt will tell you that if all you do is that kind of work and then don't pair that with flow restoration, these kind of projects will ultimately fail in the long term to really benefit fish and wildlife. So we've got to do both. There's a lot of people that have a lot of expectations of the Corp of Engineers. We try to do as much and meet as many of those expectations as possible. We're not perfect and we won't always do them correctly, but as a biologist, I can say that I'm very excited about the opportunity to be seeing some of these efforts accomplished here in the field so that really the species has an opportunity to show us whether it's good, bad, or otherwise.

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