

Yazoo Backwater Briefing draws large crowd, attention to project

Many public officials, citizens on hand to hear update

A crowd of approximately 200 people gathered at the Steele Bayou Structure, located off of Highway 61 on the Yazoo Backwater Levee, to get the facts on and hear of the need for the Yazoo Backwater Project. Held Wednesday, June 4, 2003 and hosted by the Board of Mississippi Levee Commissioners, the briefing drew a number of statewide and Delta candidates seeking office as well as concerned citizens and other public officials.

This public briefing was held to give local residents and candidates for public office in this region the chance to get an update on the ongoing progress and need for the Yazoo Backwater Project," Jim Wanamaker, Chief Engineer of the Mississippi Levee Board, said.

Wanamaker addressed the crowd about the history of the Project as well as snags the construction of the Project has encountered since being federally authorized in 1941.



Crowd at Yazoo Backwater Briefing.

"If we had the pumps today, we would have a foot and half less water where we are now," Wanamaker told the audience. "This Project is designed to protect the area of the Delta from here to about Highway 12. "Drainage from 41 percent of the continental United States goes past Vicksburg," Wanamaker said. "That's water from parts of 31 states and two provinces of Canada. In addition, water from 10 different Delta counties drain into the South Delta area to the Steele Bayou Structure and the sight of the proposed pumping plant. People here fear flooding every year, with good reason. Without the pumps, they have no assurance of not being flooded."



Wanamaker addressing crowd.

Some residents on hand, including Ruby Johnson of Cary and Clifton Porter of Fittler, also spoke to the crowd, relaying their personal encounters with flooding problems. Many others carried signs expressing support for the Project and impatience with its delay.

Mississippi Governor Ronnie Musgrove, while not being able to attend the event, expressed his continued support of the Project and of the Mississippi Levee Board's work in a phone call to Wanamaker.

Media representatives from all over the state were also on hand, including WLBT's veteran news reporter/anchor Bert Case, resulting in the

event being the Jackson station's Top Story for their evening newscast. The following night, Greenville's CBS affiliate, WXVT, lead its newscast off with an exclusive interview with Wanamaker about the briefing and the need for the pumps. - MSLB

Popular radio talk show host takes South Delta tour

Paul Gallo, a well-known talk show host and broadcast journalist from Jackson was given the South Delta Tour on May 1, 2003 viewing South Delta areas affected by flooding. Chief Engineer Jim Wanamaker reviewed the chronology and features of the YBW



Gallo listens to Wanamaker as Ruby Johnson looks on.

Project with Gallo, who said the topic of the Project comes up often on his SuperTalk FM morning show. The Mississippi Levee Board periodically invites elected officials and journalists such as Gallo on the tour to give them a better idea of what the South Delta deals with during high water events.

- MSLB

Straight Bayou Drainage District

Taking care of South Delta citizens since 1917



Seward

"We're about more than just taking care of drainage districts," says Byron Seward, President of the Straight Bayou Drainage District, formed in 1917 and based in Yazoo City. "We're also about water quality and erosion control."

The Straight Bayou Drainage District - which covers 17,184 acres in eastern Sharkey County and 33,744 acres in western Humphreys County bordered on the west by the Sunflower River and on the east by the towns of Louise, Midnight and Silver City - has a system which consists of ditches that help control the water. However, a great deal of work is involved, Seward notes.

"Water quality within the district is our biggest challenge and concern," he says. "We're trying to make do with the dollars we are allocated to get the job done properly. It's very expensive to maintain drainage by the use of canals as we do." Seward says the District is funded by a county drainage tax.

"Plus, the Sunflower River is the major drainage outlet for this area," Seward continues. "The Big Sunflower River Maintenance Project will help restore channel capacity back to the original, mid-1960's project design. We are reducing sediments by putting up water control structures to keep our ditches maintained so that as little silt as possible gets in the run off."

Working with two other commissioners, Leon Parker and William Hodnett, Seward has been president of the Straight Bayou Drainage District since 1984. He says that their relationship with the Mississippi Levee Board is an important one.

"We work with the Levee Board in helping to upkeep the ongoing projects on the Sunflower River which, in turn, helps us in our mission," Seward says. "They are certainly strong allies of the Straight Bayou Drainage District." - MSLB

Recent letters to the Editor

From *The Clarion-Ledger*

Dear Editor:

The Board of Mississippi Levee Commissioners and Staff were greatly saddened by the tragic death of Clarion Ledger Reporter, James Walker. He was always a fair, objective, and balanced reporter when covering the always sensitive environmental issues that are an integral part of our Delta flood control projects. We got to know James when he accompanied us on several South Delta Tours viewing the features and impacts of our projects. We will all miss him greatly and send our thoughts and prayers to his family.

Jim Wanamaker, Chief Engineer
Mississippi Levee Board
Greenville, MS

Corps Corner

Corps managing, keeping eye on local river levels



US Army Corps of Engineers®

Recent heavy rains over the Yazoo Basin have led to flooding in various parts of the Delta, but the situation could have been worse according to the Army Corps of Engineers.

"As river flows increased, we cut off the flow coming out of the Yazoo Basin flood control lakes to provide flood protection to the downstream area," said Joe Hendrix, senior project manager for the Corps' Upper Yazoo Project.

The gates at Arkabutla, Enid and Sardis Lake were closed and have been closed since 5 May 2003 to allow downstream conditions in the upper Delta to improve. Minimum flows from Grenada Lake were allowed to continue because they would not impact stages in the reaches downstream. Flows from Grenada Lake have been increased to 700 cubic feet per second as Yalobusha River stages have fallen below damage levels.

Approximately 150,000 acres of cropland are flooded in the upper Delta. However, about 3 to 5 feet of flooding was avoided by the Corps operation of these reservoirs, preventing major flooding of homes, croplands, and infrastructure.

"After the Upper Yazoo Project is completed, the flooding in this area will be significantly reduced. We foresee about a 3-foot reduction in the river stages during floods, which would reduce the flooding in all but the lowest lands," said Hendrix.

The Upper Yazoo Project is expected to be completed in 2012. The Corps launched an additional 20 miles of work on the channel improvement program north of Greenwood last fall. The Upper Yazoo Projects will eventually provide protection to Tallahatchie and Quitman counties, including Marks.

The Mississippi River stage on the Vicksburg gage is currently at 39.1, but is forecast to crest at 42.5 on May 25, 2003. This rise on the Mississippi River will impact the Yazoo Backwater Area north of Vicksburg.

The gates at Steele Bayou Structure were closed on Sunday, May 18 and, as of May 20, the structure is holding 1.2 feet of water out of the backwater area. Today the elevation in the backwater area is at 85.5 NGVD. Approximately 80,000 acres of cropland will be flooded if that stage increases to 88.5 NGVD, the stage expected about June 1.

"The situation is dynamic and can change with each rain event, but we are keeping a close eye on it," concluded Hendrix.

To schedule an interview with Mr. Hendrix or our water control personnel, please contact Frank Worley at 601-631-5053. - MSLB

Mississippi Levee Board completes Washington trip

As war with Iraq loomed, Board members from the Greenville, MS-based Mississippi Levee Board completed their annual visit to Washington, D.C. to put in requests for FY 2004 Appropriations and update officials on various projects.

I think this was one of the best visits we have had with our Mississippi delegation in terms of support and feedback, commented Jim Wanamaker, Chief Engineer of the Levee Board.

Added Levee Board President Fred Ballard, In light of the other major events taking place in our nation and in the world today, I believe our meetings went extremely well and I was very pleased with the types of questions we were asked and the continued show of support we received again this year.

On Monday, March 17, the Board met with staff members of Senator Thad Cochran's office and then with Senator Trent Lott. Over the next two days, the Board also had extensive visits with Congressman Bennie Thompson as well as Congressmen Chip Pickering, Roger Wicker and Gene Taylor.

Among the issues discussed with the Mississippi delegation during this trip were: the Mainline Mississippi River Levee Enlargement Project, the Big Sunflower River Maintenance Project and the Yazoo Backwater Project, the latter of which Senators Lott and Cochran and Congressman Thompson recently endorsed.



Left to Right: Tindall, Carter, Robinson, Ballard, House, Wanamaker, Rodgers, Nimrod, Wheeler and Nichols

On Wednesday, March 19, the Levee Board attended the annual Mississippi River Congressional Caucus to hear updates on regional flood control issues and to meet with members of the Caucus.

As always, it is important for us to make these trips every year to have dialogues with our elected officials and answer any questions they may have for us regarding the critical flood control work we

do, Ballard said. We appreciate the time and attention we always receive from our delegation and the fact that they comprehend and support our mission of protecting the citizens of the Mississippi Delta from the ravages of flooding.

Along with Ballard and Wanamaker, Mississippi Levee Board members who made the Washington trip were: Kenny Rodgers, Vice President, Humphreys County; Johnny Robinson, Commissioner, Washington County; James House, Jr., Commissioner, Bolivar County; Nott Wheeler, Jr., Commissioner, Bolivar County; Roy Nichols, Commissioner, Issaquena County; Laurance Carter, Commissioner, Sharkey County; Peter Nimrod, Assistant Engineer; Charles S. Tindall, III, Board Attorney and Jack Criss, Executive Vice President of the public relations firm, Coopwood Communications. - MSLB



Delta Council Flood Control Committee Meeting - Jim Wanamaker addresses the Flood Control Committee on April 24, 2003. An overview of Levee Board responsibilities, activities and project updates were presented.



MRC High Water Inspection - Jim Wanamaker briefs the MS River Commission on April 9, 2003 during the annual High Water Inspection on the status of various flood control projects in the MS Levee District.

Levee Board projects UPDATE

LEVEE ENLARGEMENT PROJECTS:

Item 502L - 7.6 mile conventional levee enlargement project is 99% complete. The turfing has not been accepted on this project. This project is anticipated to be accepted this Summer at which time the Levee Board will complete fencing.

Item 496L - 10.5 mile levee enlargement and dredged berm project is 91% complete. Chancellor & Sons and their sub-contractor G.B. Boots Construction Corp. are utilizing haul trucks to haul conventional borrow to top out the levee.



Item 496L - Topping out the Levee



Item 496L - Conventional borrow area

Item 477L - 5.1 mile levee enlargement project is 34% complete. ASA Enterprises is utilizing tractors and scrapers to haul conventional borrow.

Item 488L - 8.8 mile levee enlargement and dredged berm project will start this Summer. The bid was delayed due to the high water. The Levee Board has completed the (right of way) acquisition.



Item 496L - Enlarging Base of Levee

BIG SUNFLOWER RIVER MAINTENANCE PROJECT:

The Mississippi Supreme Court remanded the decision on the Water Quality Permit back to the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ). The MDEQ has hired an independent environmental engineering firm to review the administrative record and other data.

The Corps of Engineers is in the process of completing a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) for the project.

Once the Water Quality Permit is granted and the Record of Decision is signed for the SEIS, construction can begin. The r.o.w. has been acquired and the engineering has been completed for the first item of work. This first dredging item of work is on the lower half of the Little Sunflower River. We are looking at September, 2004 for a start up date for construction to resume on the Big Sunflower River Maintenance Project.



Item 496L - Seeding operation



Item 477L - Enlarging Base of Levee

YAZOO BACKWATER PROJECT:

The Corps and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) are working closely to resolve the difference in impacted wetland acreage prior to completing the Final Report. The Final Reformulation Report of the Yazoo Backwater Project is scheduled to be completed this Fall.

MS River high water recap

As consistently heavy rainfall events occurred in the Mississippi, Ohio, Tennessee and Arkansas Valleys, we experienced a high water event in late May, 2003. The following are 2003 highwater crests:

2003 HIGHWATER CRESTS

GAGE	BANK FULL	DATE	STAGE
Arkansas City	37.0	5/26/03	37.9
Greenville	48.0	5/26/03	49.7
Vicksburg	43.0	5/29/03	43.0

This is the second year in a row that we have experienced a high water event. In 2002 we had the following crests on the Arkansas, Greenville and Vicksburg gages: 40.2, 51.9 and 45.4 respectively. - **MSLB**



Board Member Profile:

James House, Jr.: Bolivar County



Since 1994, James W. "Jimmy" House, Jr. has been an active and involved Bolivar County Levee Commissioner. A Rosedale resident, House says he has lived right next to the Levee for the last 50 years, so his position is one that hits close to home.

"I've always had an interest in the Levee and the Mississippi River," House says. "And being a farmer, I'm also very interested in drainage issues. So, being a Mississippi Levee Board Commissioner is really a natural fit."

House was appointed to fill the term of Bolivar County Commissioner Harry "Brother" Wilson when Wilson passed away in 1994. "Since then, I have successfully run for two terms on my own," he adds.

"My main concern here in Bolivar County is the Mainline Mississippi River Levee," House says when asked about his top priorities as a Commissioner. "Proper interior drainage of our county is crucial, too, because most of this water drains to the South Delta. Given this fact, Bolivar County is a strong supporter for the completion of the Yazoo Backwater Pump Project. I also work with the Clear Creek Drainage District here in Bolivar County for that very reason. Without good drainage, you cannot sustain economic development."

Besides being a cotton and soybean farmer, House also owns and operates McCaslin Insurance Agency in Rosedale. His wife's name is Anne and the couple are the parents of a son, Will, and the grandparents of Winn and Clark. House is an elder in the First Presbyterian Church in Rosedale. - **MSLB**

MS Levee Board Officers & Staff

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Johnny Robinson,
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Luther Alexander:

A Washington County leader reflects on career of service

Luther Alexander of Greenville has long been a leader in service for the Delta. Having served the community for some 46 years in Washington County, this Alcorn State University graduate has most recently been Supervisor District 4 and Vice President on the Washington County Board of Supervisors. Prior to his selection as a Supervisor, Alexander served as a County Agent with the Cooperative Extension Service.

In addition to his Washington County public service, Alexander also has served as a Vice President of Delta Council, the first African-American to do so, and has been an active member of the organization for years. He is also a member of the Alcorn Alumni Association, the Elks Club, the Greenville Chamber of Commerce, the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post, and a member of the Sacred Heart Catholic Church.

Alexander's list of civic honors received over the years are many and varied. They include: Alconite of the Year for 1976 ("I'm particularly proud of that," Alexander says); 1982 Distinguished Service Award given by the Cooperative Extension Service; the Community Award from the NEA in 1989; the 1990 Liberty Bell Award from the Bar Association; and in 1991, induction into the Alcorn University Hall of Fame.

"I've known Mr. Alexander for many years," says Greenville Mayor Paul Artman. "He's always been an amicable gentleman who has put the community first and has lived his entire life providing outstanding public service." Artman says that he thinks the most impressive thing about Alexander is his total commitment to serving the interests of the community.

"With the Extension Service and the Board of Supervisors in Washington County, Mr. Alexander has carried himself in a dignified and devoted way," Artman continues. "His wife, Floyd, has also been an enthusiastic supporter of the community as she has stood by Mr. Alexander's side all these years." Alexander and his wife are the parents of two children and four grandchildren.

"Mr. Alexander has also known, through his work at the Extension Service and Delta Council, the impact of flooding on his constituents and fellow Deltans," Artman adds. "He has always been committed to making sure that the residents of Washington County have the best protection against flooding."

"I've worked with the Mississippi Levee Board for over 25 years now," Alexander says. "We've collaborated on a number of projects designed to help our people, most importantly the Yazoo Backwater Pump Project. We've been trying to get the pumps in here since 1941, and we've got to have them in place, as was promised, to protect our fellow citizens."

"Luther has been extremely helpful to the Mississippi Levee Board," says Jim Wanamaker, Chief Engineer, "particular in assisting with the acquisition of rights of way for the Upper Steele Bayou Project that provides the outlet for Greenville's flood water. Luther also served as Co-Chairman of 'Flood Control NOW!', a citizen's group, in the early 90's to offset strong opposition to all the Delta's flood control projects by the environmental community."

"The Mississippi Levee Board has done an outstanding job," Alexander says. "I've lived through many floods myself, and I can tell you

that the work they do, along with our drainage districts, is invaluable. These people opposed to the pumps bother me. They don't know what we all go through to keep the flood waters down."

Tommy Goodwin, County Administrator for Washington County, has worked with Alexander since 1988. "He is truly a fair-minded and dedicated individual," Goodwin says, "and is one of the best proponents of County Extension and Delta Council work I've ever seen. Luther was the first minority Vice President and Chairman of Flood Control for Delta Council, so the issue of flooding and flood control is critical to him. He has also been a tireless advocate for the pumps," Goodwin adds.

Alexander says the fondest memories in his multi-faceted career come from the years he has spent on the Board of Supervisors and his time at the Extension Service. "I feel very fortunate to have been able to do what I've done for my home," Alexander reflects. By the same token, Washington County is fortunate to call Luther Alexander a native son. - MSLB



Alexander and wife, Floyd

2002 Conservation Title update

By **Trey Cooke**
Executive Director, **Delta Wildlife, Inc.**

After the 2002 Farm Bill was signed, the phone lines lit up at the Delta Wildlife office. Everyone wanted to know what conservation programs were going to be offered, how would the programs be administered, how much funding is each county going to receive, what conservation practices are going to be cost shared, and when could they sign up. In May of 2002, my answer was, I don't know. Fortunately, the USDA has been busy developing the programs outlined in the Conservation Title of the 2002 Farm Bill, making it easier to answer many of these questions today. But after one full year, some of the questions can still not be answered.

The first program to be fully developed and implemented was the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, or EQIP for short. The state NRCS quickly developed a list of conservation practices that would be offered for cost sharing. Mississippi counties selected practices on this list that would most benefit their specific county. Landowners quickly started to apply for EQIP funds and the program has been moving forward ever since. One reason for the program's quick development was the significant increase in total program appropriations. The program received a funding increase of nearly 800%, providing conservation opportunities to more landowners in each county.

Another program that continued to move forward without a hitch was the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). After the program was re-authorized and the total program acre enrollment cap was raised, the only change that was made was in the easement payment cap. Mississippi raised the cap from \$750/acre to \$900/acre. This increased landowner interest and participation. The first WRP applications made under the new farm bill have already been ranked and restoration work will begin next summer.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) was also re-authorized, allowing for additional acres to be enrolled under the total program enrollment cap.

Since there had not been a General CRP Sign-Up in several years, landowners were excited about having another chance to enroll land into the program. Historically, Delta landowners found land in this region could not score high enough to be accepted into CRP as the ranking process was based on an Erosion Index that is highly dependent on slope. Fortunately, the USDA-FSA designated the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta as a priority area to increase opportunities for enrollment in the region. The first of the two General Sign-Ups under the new

farm bill was just completed.

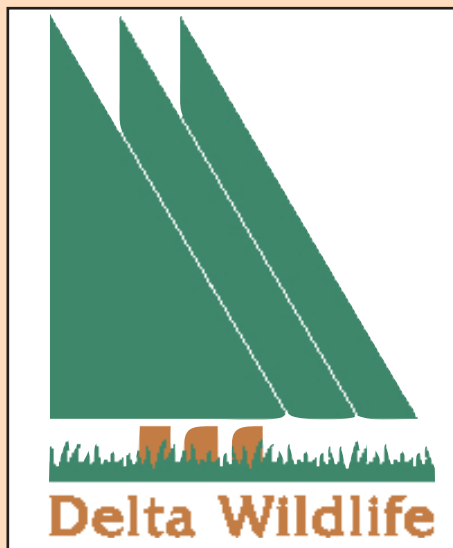
The Continuous Conservation Reserve Program (Continuous CRP) was provided for under the 2002 Farm Bill through the regular CRP authorization. Details of this program have continuously changed over time, but remains the most economically beneficial conservation program offered in the Mississippi Delta region. Landowners may sign up for this Buffer Program at anytime hence the name Continuous Sign-Up. The program offers \$150/acre signing bonus, 20% higher annual rental payments, and 90% cost sharing. The normal administration of this program has been standardized since the program began in April of 2000, under the 1996 Farm Bill. However, landowners and conservation groups are awaiting new developments in the program as Secretary Veneman announced on Earth Day that the USDA was going to allow 500,000 acres of bottomland hardwood reforestation under a special Continuous CRP Sign-Up after the first General CRP Sign-Up is completed. No details have

been released on this special Continuous CRP Sign-Up, but it will certainly benefit landowners in the Mississippi Delta.

Other programs like the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) have also moved forward through the process. But other programs have been less fortunate, leaving us with more unanswered questions.

One such program that is far from being finalized is the Conservation Security Program (CSP). This program promises to reward landowners for conservation practices that have been implemented and maintained voluntarily. The number of practices and extent they are implemented will place landowners in one of three categories. The category, or Tier as the USDA calls it, determines the amount of the reward. More conservation equals more reward. Currently, it is thought that the amount of the reward will be 5% (Tier I), 10% (Tier II), or 15% (Tier III) of the national soil rental rate per acre. Landowners could receive payments through CSP up to \$25,000 in Tier I, \$35,000 in Tier II, or \$45,000 in Tier III per year. Even though it sounds like the USDA has finalized many CSP details, questions remain unanswered. When will the program be implemented? No one knows. Will there be funding for the program? No one knows. What practices are needed to be certified in a Tier? No one knows.

Even though many of the major programs have been implemented, landowners and conservation groups are waiting to find out more about new programs like CSP and the Grassland Reserve Program. - **MSLB**



Opposing forces still dug in over pumps

by Charlie Mitchell
The Vicksburg Post, June 9, 2003

The Vicksburg Post.

Attention environmentalists: The equivalent of a forest has been felled somewhere just to make enough paper to hold all the design work, all the studies, all the law suits, all the arguments for, all the arguments against and everything else involved with a pumping plant at the Steele Bayou Control Structure. Enough should be enough.

But if enough is not enough, consider this cosmic convergence: Rep. Bennie C. Thompson, D-Miss, who represents the Mississippi in the U.S. House, and U.S. Sen. Trent Lott, R-Miss, who represents the state in the Senate, do not agree on anything. But they agree on the pumps, as now proposed, as a worthwhile project. You'd really never know it around these parts, but this scaled-back \$180 million Corps of Engineers project remains front and center in the ongoing national war between "preservation" and production camps in our society. If you have an Internet connection, go to any Web browser and type "Steele Bayou" in the search form. Thousands of articles and reports in hundreds of publications will pop up. No less important (or self-important) voice than *The New York Times* has weighed in repeatedly, condemning the whole nation of flood relief in the lower Mississippi Delta as nothing more than a Republican conspiracy. (That paper is probably going to spend more than \$180 million in paying off the "news executives" it is easing out the door.) There is nothing complicated about the Steele Bayou project. And it will add wildlife habitat, not reduce it.

Think of the Mississippi Delta, from Memphis to just above Vicksburg as a bathtub. The Yazoo River and steep hills form the eastern side. The Mainline Levee of the Mississippi River forms the western side. The Yazoo Ring Levee forms the base and Steele Bayou itself is that little trickle leading to the drain. The drain itself is the gates installed in the levee. The gates are closed, as in recent weeks, when the Mississippi and Yazoo are so high that Steele Bayou would flow backward, filling up the bathtub. But while closing the gates protects the Delta from "backwater," rain and seepage water starts filling the Delta from the other direction. And cotton, soybeans and corn won't grow in standing water. Neither will hardwood trees, by the way.

The pumps would move that impounded water over the levee and into the river stream, keeping more farmland open. It would be like using a cup to empty the tub when the drain is clogged. In the latest compromise, tens of thousands of acres now cleared for crops would be returned to timber—which is what they were before cleared for farming. These decades-long struggles are something to behold. Any objective observer would have to say the environmentalists have won—but they just aren't ready to declare victory.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and others have exacted real compromises and redesigns to make this project as good for the birds and the bees and the flowers and the trees as it is for any humans tired of being soaked by the impounded water. But they won't declare victory and let the project proceed. And members of the Delta's levee commission and others — most of whom consider themselves friends of the environment, too—plan to keep pressing to see plans first drawn 60 or so years ago brought to fruition.

On a pretty day, go up U.S. 61 and across the Yazoo bridge. Turn into Mississippi 465 and drive five or six miles. At the approach to a long bridge, pull off and look at the Steele Bayou Control Structure. It's impressive, but you'd never know it's at the center of such a high-stakes, wide-ranging debate. Unless you looked on the Internet. Or read *The New York Times*.



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