

OH, BLAST AND DAM!

To protect the once bustling trade town of Cairo, Illinois from ruinous flooding, engineers designed the Birds Point Levee. The Birds Point Levee breaches naturally, but if more breaching is required, explosives allow floodwaters to spread out over the floodway and reduce river levels upstream.

The Birds Point Levee forms a section of the frontline levee at the northern reach of the New Madrid Floodway. The New Madrid Floodway is an area of land enclosed by embankments or levees, except for a 1,500 foot gap near its southern-most point. Engineers included this gap to drain water from the floodway should it breach the levees. The New Madrid Floodway comprises some 200 square miles of Missouri farmland along the Mississippi River, stretching south from Cairo to New Madrid, Missouri.

In some ways “floodway” is a misnomer. The levees that surround the New Madrid Floodway primarily protect inlying river communities from annual spring flooding. Only during periods of calamitous flooding is the term apt. At these times the levees surrounding the floodway can raise floodwaters upstream to such a point that they threaten to overwhelm the flood prevention system around Cairo.

Because engineers expected such breaches to be rare and the farmland below Cairo to flood less after construction of the levees, the floodway project enjoyed popular support. In more recent years, support has grown for completely enclosing the floodway in the south to protect more farmland in the floodway. Here water flowing north seasonally enters the floodway and has, at times, covered the entire southern half of the floodway.

In the wake (no pun intended) of historic flooding along the Mississippi River in April 2011, the US Army Corps of Engineers announced preparations to blast a two-mile hole in the Birds Point Levee to prevent flooding in Cairo, now an impoverished town of 2,800, which is nearly two-thirds non-white. On 1 May, Missouri Attorney General Chris Koster petitioned the U.S. Supreme Court to bar the US Army Corps of Engineers from breaching the levee. Doing so would affect some 130,000 acres of farmland and displace the 230 residents who live in the floodway.

In Jefferson City, reporters asked the Missouri House Speaker, Steve Tilley, “Would you rather have Missouri farmland flooded or Cairo underwater?” Tilley responded, “Cairo. I’ve been there. Trust me. Cairo. Have you been to Cairo? Okay, then you know what I’m saying” (Huffington Post 28 April 2011).

Early Sunday morning, 2 May, US Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito rejected the State of Missouri’s petition (10A1059). The next day Major General Michael J. Walsh, President of the Mississippi River Commission, gave the order for the Corps to set off the first blasts, causing water to rush into the floodway.

In the aftermath of the Corps’ decision to destroy the levee, debate has centered on the accountability of those in the position to decide the course of the river, including who, in fact, had final authority to destroy the Birds Point Levee. Within 24 hours of the Corps’ work, the river level at Cairo had dropped from a record of 61.72 feet to 59.4 feet.