



MISSOURI RIVER MITIGATION PROJECT

PROJECT AREA DESCRIPTION

Before the arrival of European settlers, the Missouri River was a turbid, braided prairie stream. Its width varied from a few hundred yards to half a mile, and it featured both shallow and deep areas. Flow in the river fluctuated greatly from season to season and year to year. Thus, the river supported a large diversity of aquatic habitats. Bottomland hardwoods, wet meadows, and prairies covered the floodplains, providing varied terrestrial habitats.

In the project area, four federally-listed threatened and endangered species occur: the bald eagle, pallid sturgeon, least tern, and piping plover. In addition, the project area is home to 25 state-listed species, including the chestnut lamprey, silverband shiner, and flathead chub.

Although some bottomland hardwood forests and prairies still exist in the riparian area, most of the floodplains have been converted to agricultural use. Large cities, such as Omaha, Kansas City, and St. Louis, are located on the floodplains. The Missouri River itself is used for navigation, commercial and recreational fishing, recreational boating, industrial and household water supply, and dredging of gravel and sand.

ECOSYSTEM STRESSES

Between 1912 and the late 1970s, the entire lower 735 miles of the river was channelized and lined with levees. The river became a nine foot deep, three hundred foot wide channel with very little habitat diversity. As a result, many species that historically occurred in the river are now in decline. Channelization has caused the river to erode its bed and run deeper, and some of the side channels of the river have become perched above

the main channel and are no longer connected to it. Many similar hydrologic connections between the river and its wetlands are no longer in place.

Once the River was channelized and the levees were in place, it became feasible to clear the associated floodplains of hardwoods and prairies and to plant crops. Clearing occurred in many cases all the way to the edge of the river. Terrestrial habitat was lost as a result. Non-point source pollution such as sediments, agricultural chemicals, urban runoff, inputs from sewage treatment plants, and effluents from heavy industry pose an additional problem, as they find their way into the river.

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In the mid-1970s the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the states of Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska recognized the impact of the channelization of the Missouri River on its fish and wildlife resources. The six agencies subsequently set out to restore approximately 50,000 acres of fish and wildlife habitat in the lower 735 miles of the Missouri River.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is the lead agency, with the four states and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service actively involved in all phases of the project. During the planning phase, specific restoration sites were identified and prioritized, and restoration plans were developed for each site. In 1990, federal funds were made available to the Army Corps of Engineers to initiate

Location:

Lower 735 miles of the Missouri River, Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, and Missouri

Project size:

50,000 acres

Initiators:

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

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the implementation phase of the project. One major strategy is the restoration of habitat on existing state and federal lands. A second strategy is to acquire land from willing sellers for habitat restoration. In both cases, restoration includes reforestation and the hydrologic reconnection of wetlands and side channels to the Missouri River.

PRESENT STATUS & OUTLOOK

It is too early to determine if any of the goals of the project have been realized. Habitat Evaluation Guidelines have been developed to be used over time to document the benefits of the project.

Approximately 8,500 acres of land have been acquired, and habitat restoration has started. It is expected that terrestrial habitats will recover more rapidly than aquatic habitats.

Factors Facilitating Progress

So far, excellent cooperation between federal and state agencies has been particularly helpful in the progress of the project. Federal agencies have benefited from the strong and united support of the states and their political representatives in Washington, D.C.

Obstacles to Progress

A major interruption resulted

from the floods of 1993, which required the Army Corps of Engineers to direct its attention elsewhere. Continuation of funding is presently a concern. The project is 100% federally funded, with annual appropriations required.

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