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The MSAC Mission is to pursue and promote the intelligent use of all available programs and funds to alleviate the sedimentation-caused problems of the Missouri River main-stem reservoirs.

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## Corps studies Niobrara Flooding

*The following newspaper article, written by Randy Dockendorf, appeared in the January 27, 2011 edition of the Yankton Press & Dakotan. (Reprinted with permission from the Yankton Press & Dakotan)*

NIOBRARA, Neb. — Corps of Engineers officials say they remain baffled on how to stop the flooding of Niobrara's lower west side that has continued for nearly a week.

Missouri River flooding has shaped the history of the town — it's been moved twice to higher ground. However, area residents are saying the current flooding is unlike anything they have seen before.

In response to the current Niobrara flooding, the Corps reduced the Missouri River releases, said Dave Becker, operations project manager at the Gavins Point project near Yankton.

"We heard about the problem on Friday, so we lowered our flows out of Fort Randall Dam (at Pickstown) from 18,500 cubic feet per second (cfs) to 17,500 cubic feet per second," he said.

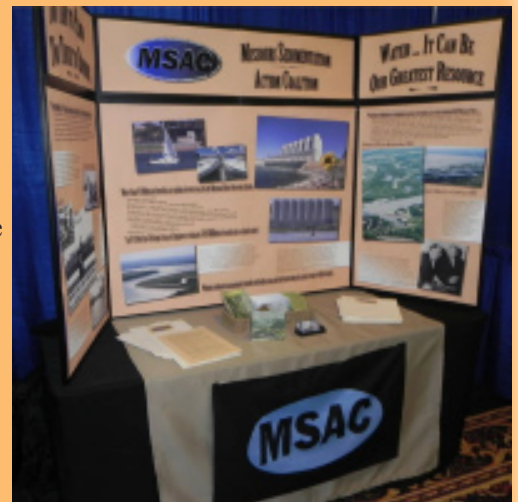
**Continued on page 2**

Vic's Service on the west edge of Niobrara at the Junction of HWYs 12/14  
MSAC Photo Feb. 10, 2011

## *Sediment photos and facts help tell the story ...*

See Display Panel 1, outlining the history of the reservoir system on page 3. Look for panels 2 and 3 in upcoming MSAC newsletters. Special thanks to Planning & Development District III in Yankton for assisting with panel printing.

In January, MSAC unveiled its updated tabletop display at the South Dakota Rural Water Association annual conference in Pierre. If your organization or community has an event or location available for the display, contact Sandy Korkow (see below). The display focuses on three primary areas: a) the conditions that influenced the passage of the Flood Control Act of 1944 b) the benefits produced by the reservoir system and c) the need for sediment management to preserve the system and its benefits. MSAC also brings its message to audiences with PowerPoint presentations and the Tony Dean DVD. Contact us if you would like a free DVD. Quantities may be limited.



### To reach Missouri Sedimentation Action Coalition:

Sandy Korkow, Executive Director, PO Box 2, Springfield, SD 57062 [sandrak@gwtc.net](mailto:sandrak@gwtc.net) PH: 605-369-2745

Howard Paul, Technical Coordinator, 1511 Holiday Drive, Canton, SD 57013 [hpaul@sio.midco.net](mailto:hpaul@sio.midco.net) PH: 605-987-4165

## Niobrara .... Continued from page 1

“After those flows were reduced on Friday, we left them down. We were just trying to get an understanding of what is going on — if there is something we can do, or if it’s a fact of nature and something we can’t control.”

The Corps attributes the problem to Niobrara River siltation that dumps into the Missouri River, Becker said.

“There has been 53 years of sedimentation accumulated at the delta,” he said. “It affects everything, so I’m sure it contributes (to this flooding). The sediment has raised the water levels considerably.”

The sediment has dramatically worsened at the same time that the region has seen historic flooding, Becker said.

“We had major flooding issues in the Niobrara area back in the 1990s, when they had high (Missouri River) flows,” he said. “Then we had the drought period, and we didn’t have as many problems because there wasn’t as much water in the river.

“Now, we are in our third wettest year in 112 years on the Missouri River, and these problems show up as extreme events.”

Most of the Knox County community of 400 now sits on a hill overlooking the Missouri River. However, a portion of the town — including the K-12 school with about 165 students — remains on lower ground.

Niobrara school superintendent Margaret Sandoz said the district continues to monitor the situation. However, the nearby flooding has not disrupted classroom activities or the school calendar, she said.

“The school is not currently in jeopardy, and we are running business as usual,” she said. “However, three of our five ground water test wells are frozen in and around with the floodwater. I am hoping for a solution soon. This isn’t even our typical flood season.”

Corps officials from Yankton and Omaha have inspected and taken readings in and around Niobrara since last Friday, Becker said. What makes the current flooding even more unusual is its winter occurrence, he said.

“We spent four hours up there (Tuesday), and we looked at the ice and sediment on the Missouri and Niobrara rivers,” he said. “We don’t see anything at this point in time that is constricting the flows anywhere and making the water back up. Our guys will take a look at the data and see if they can do something.”

The Corps, along with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, met with Niobrarians this week to learn the flooding’s impact on the residents’ everyday lives, Becker said.

“We didn’t come up with easy answers, but we’re going to put our heads together and see if we can come up with

some kind of battle plan in the next week,” he said.

Meanwhile, Victor and Ruth Janak can only watch as floodwaters continue to fill their mechanic and service shop after nearly a week. Their shop is located in the lower part of the west side of town, at the junction of Nebraska Highways 12 and 14.

As of Tuesday night, Vic’s Service was filled with 11 inches of water, silt and ice. The water drops down to 5 or 6 inches during the afternoon, giving them hope, only to see the flooding rise back to the original levels.

“We are waiting to see what the Corps decides to do,” Ruth said. “They had a meeting up here (Tuesday), and they are just as puzzled as we are, on what to do with the situation.”

Even amidst the chaos, the Janaks didn’t stop serving the public.

“We had a customer on Sunday who needed a hydraulic hose, and here was Vic working on one for him, even with the water all around us,” Ruth said.

Vic’s work was perhaps a desire to maintain normalcy and conduct business as usual, or it may have been a belief that the flooding was temporary.

But the Janaks quickly realized that they were in for the long haul in a situation they don’t understand. They were informed they weren’t located in a flood plain, but now they are told that their insurance won’t cover their losses.

“We have to deal with the Corps, and we need to go through lawyers,” Ruth said, adding that they are facing an elevation study that would cost \$600.

Niobrara village clerk Bob Olson said the siltation has worsened since last summer, particularly during the last month or two.

“I think there are problems with water digging away at the mouth of the (Niobrara) river,” he said. “The water is backing up on the Niobrara and can’t get into the Missouri. They have dropped the Missouri River (during the past week), but it ran high all summer.”

Olson has lived most of his life in Niobrara and hasn’t seen anything like the current flooding, particularly in the current location.

“This situation has never occurred before, not at this level,” he said.

The construction of the Missouri River dams has changed the natural flow of the river, Olson said.

“It used to be, every few years there would be a flood that would scour out the channel and send the silt down to New Orleans,” he said. “But it doesn’t do that anymore, it just stops here (at Niobrara).”

The Corps maintained even higher Missouri River

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*“There has been 53 years of sedimentation accumulated at the delta. It affects everything, so I’m sure it contributes (to this flooding). The sediment has raised the water levels considerably.”*

**-- Dave Becker  
Operations Project Manager  
Gavins Point near Yankton**

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“The Big Muddy,” “Too thin to plow, too thick to drink,” “Riverboat graveyard,” are only some of the names given to the Missouri River when it flowed freely over its 2,341 mile length, from the Rocky Mountains to its mouth at the Mississippi River at St. Louis, flowing through 10 states, past 28 Native American tribes and 10 million people. The Big Muddy reportedly wrecked 297 steamboats between 1832 and 1910. Even in periods of drought, the Missouri River was still a flooding threat because of its large drainage area of more than 1/3 of the United States.

The Missouri River caused millions of dollars in damages when it flooded. These floods could be disastrous, taking property and sometimes lives in its wild flow. In 1943, thousands of acres of farmland were flooded. Airport runways at Omaha sat under 8 feet of water. Factories, highways and railroads were flooded. This flooding hampered the war-time military effort.

Yankton 1881, Oahe Dam Dedication 1962 and Pierre 1952 photos courtesy of the State Archives of the South Dakota State Historical Society

**YANKTON 1881**

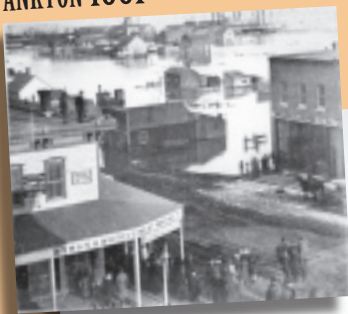


Photo courtesy of the State Archives of the South Dakota State Historical Society

**OAHE DAM DEDICATION 1962**



Photo courtesy of the State Archives of the South Dakota State Historical Society

Congress passed the Flood Control Act of 1944, also known as the Pick-Sloan Plan, to capture those benefits through construction of dams on the river. Even though the flood risk cannot be eliminated, the Missouri River Main Stem dams have prevented billions in damages to property and infrastructure. Today's floods would be much worse without them.

**PICK INSPECTS LEEVE AT OMAHA, 1943**



Bureau of Reclamation Photo

*“What happens in this basin helps all the people of all the country. What happens in the East helps the West; what happens in the South helps the North. This country would not have achieved the highest standard of living in the world, the largest productive power, if we had been merely 180 million different people.”*

**—John F. Kennedy  
Oahe Dam Dedication  
August 17, 1962**

Citation: John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, The American Presidency Project (online), Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database) Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/?pid=8221>

**PIERRE 1952**



Photo courtesy of the State Archives of the South Dakota State Historical Society

Pick Inspects Levee at Omaha/Bureau of Reclamation photo

**Niobrara .... Continued from page 2**

releases about 15 years ago than it does today, Olson said. However, the current releases create a greater impact because the riverbed constantly silts in, he said.

Olson and other Niobrarians look with concern at the upcoming spring thaw and the prospect of even more flooding.

Knox County emergency manager Laura Hintz said she met this week with the Corps of Engineers and the Game and Parks Commission. She also accompanied the National Weather Service during its survey of recording stations.

“Everyone is stymied as to what is causing (this type of flooding). It hasn’t happened in that area before,” she said. “And now the water comes up and ice forms on top of it, but it’s still under snow.”

Hintz continues monitoring local facilities for potential flooding. So far, the water has remained at bay from several sites, she said.

“The city (of Niobrara) has wells down there, but they are not under water,” she said. “We have a building belong-

ing to the Ponca Tribe that has nothing in it. The Nebraska Department of Roads has a state yard. There are grain bins, hay storage and a cement plant. They all have water close to it.”

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*Olson and other Niobrarians look with concern at the upcoming spring thaw and prospect of even more flooding.*

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In addition, Niobrara State Park officials are monitoring the impact of ice and flooding on a trail bridge, Hintz said. And at one point, water was creeping up on Highway 14, which was highly unusual, but has since receded, she added.

The future remains uncertain, Hintz said. “We don’t know what Friday will bring,” she said.

Olson hopes that local residents are spared major flooding in the lower west side of Niobrara. “I hope it turns out for the business people and property in that area, but it’s not good,” he said.

However, the Janaks believe it’s too late to save their 17-year-old business.

“We are both 50. We will be done with our business,” Ruth said. “Who wants to start over at this time in your life?”

**Annual Membership Meeting Notice Enclosed March 22 Niobrara, Neb.**

