US Army Corps of Engineers ®
St. Louis District

News Release

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St. Louis, Mo. – May 21, 2009 - Note to editors:

We have received media queries in the last 24 hours that indicate we need to better explain some elements of the current high water situation. This is not to imply anyone is putting out incorrect information, but is to try to ensure that you best understand impacts of certain actions by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on the river during high water events such as we are currently experiencing.

Queries have asked whether we are "discharging river flows" at our dams and what impact this is having downstream in St. Louis.

The dams on the Mississippi River upstream of St. Louis are not associated with flood risk management. They are instead, low flow or low water control structures that maintain the elevation of the pools above each dam and up to the next lock and dam on the river. Their role is to ensure that the Corps of Engineers is able to maintain adequate depth for safe commercial navigation on the Mississippi River. The dam gates are modulated down to nearly closed when river flows are lower, during dry periods. When we experience high water events, they are progressively opened to permit water to flow downstream and to prevent excessive build-up in the pool above each dam. As we approach flood stages in the pools, dam gates are lifted from the river and the river runs at what we term "open river." This is the situation throughout the St. Louis District from Clarksville south to the Mel Price Locks and Dam at this time.

Water flows and elevations are monitored in the water control office in St. Louis, as they are in the St. Paul and Rock Island Districts to the north. Decisions on settings for dam gates are made from those offices and in cooperation with each other as well as in consultation with the National Weather Service.

In the end however, the Mississippi River's flows are dictated by rain and run off or the lack thereof.

There are structures that affect river flows – our reservoir lakes. Lake Shelbyville and Carlyle Lake can and do absorb high inflows from rain events and hold them until conditions have changed and we can discharge them at measured rates down the Kaskaskia River. Similarly, Mark Twain Lake on the Salt River northwest of St. Louis can help alleviate high water events down through St. Louis and beyond downstream along the Mississippi River.

In a related situation, the Illinois River continues to remain at flood stage. While Illinois River elevations are not remarkably high, the river has been at flood stage with water against the levees for a substantial part of the last 12 months. The Illinois River watershed has received a series of rain events in recent months. In addition the Illinois has a very flat slope and discharges slowly. This is exacerbated at this time by the high level of the Mississippi River, into which the Illinois flows.

The St. Louis District has flood fighting technical experts in the field along the Illinois River to support and advise levee districts on that river. We are particularly watching for possible impacts due to saturation of levees due to long term flood levels. The two main dangers to levees are elevation and duration: how high water gets and how long it stays up against the levees. These efforts are being conducted in close concert with the local drainage and levee districts. In addition, the U.S. Coast Guard has placed certain restrictions such as hours of operation at certain points on the Illinois River and tow speeds to minimize wave wash impacts.

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