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Corps: Goal Is To Not Execute Plan

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Corps: Goal Is To Not Execute Plan

*By Annabeth Miller,
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SIKESTON, Mo. - Fighting floods in 2011 is an art coupled with science, according to the commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in charge of directing efforts on the Mississippi River.

Col. Vernie L. Reichling, commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Memphis District, said the corps top priority is public safety as the floodfighting on the river is coming down to a matter of inches and cooperation from Mother Nature.

Reichling spoke Thursday afternoon at the corps information center in Sikeston. He explained that floodfighting in 2011 is taking a “systems-wide” approach – what one part of the river does affects the whole. “‘Hold as much as you can.’ That is our message to our brothers north and east of us,” Reichling said. He explained the corps is holding back as much water as possible in Lakes Barkley and Kentucky, reducing the waters flowing into the Ohio and into the Mississippi. “This is a system approach to try to prevent not only the operation of the (Birds Point New Madrid) floodway, but reducing the risk of flooding all over.”

“We are not out of the woods yet,” he said. As of Thursday, Reichling reported the corps had a large contingent in the region fighting the flood.

“We have plenty of boots on the ground,” he said. There are currently 200 men and women in the field and the corps has spend \$3.3 million in fighting the flood since it activated on Sunday, April 24.

Reichling is the officer in charge of the corps operation in the floodway, but he reports to Maj. Gen. Michael Walsh, president of the Mississippi River Commission. It is the commission that will issue any order to activate the floodway in Southeast Missouri.

Reichling and his staff said the corps was doing everything possible to avoid activating the floodway – accomplished by blowing holes in the Birds Point levee. However, the stage is set if such an action is ordered. The MV Mississippi, a corps motor vessel is currently at Hickman, Kent., with two barges carrying the munitions that would be used to blow three holes in the floodway levee – one at the northern end and two south. But this action would submerge over 130,000 acres of prime agriculture land, destroy homes and the livelihood of a region.

The corps has completed the ground preparations at two of the three sites on the levee system, and the third expected to be completed by the end of Thursday. But the munitions will remain downriver and no further action will be taken until – or if – the order is given to activate the floodway.

“We are listening to the river ,” Reichling said “This is not a science – it is an art. We are taking a holistic approach and reacting to the stresses on the system. We are constantly evaluation conditions,” he said. “Our goal is to not execute the floodway.”

Photo Above: Col. Vernie L. Reichling, Commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Memphis District, points out features of the Birds Point New Madrid Floodway during a briefing.

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