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Corps: First Step Taken In Floodway Plan

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*By Annabeth Miller,
ShowMe Times Editor*

SIKESTON, Mo. - No official decision has been made to activate the Birds Point – New Madrid Floodway, but the commander in charge of floodfighting efforts said the first step was taken Saturday afternoon toward possible activation.

Major General Michael J. Walsh, commander of the Mississippi Valley Division of the corps and the president of the Mississippi River Commission, said at a press conference Saturday afternoon that he ordered the Motor Vessel Mississippi, a corps vessel, to leave Hickman, Kent., and travel up river to Birds Point.

“That’s one of the many decisions we make before - and if - we ever get to the decision of operating,” the floodway, Walsh said. The MV Mississippi arrived at Birds Point Saturday evening.

Walsh said three additional decisions must be made now that the barges have been moved to the northern end of the floodway at Birds Point: take the barges and “pre-position them; then the decision would be made to charge the pipes; and finally a decision to operate the floodway by blowing three gaps in the levee – one at the northern end at Birds Point and two down at the southern end of the system.


“There are still a lot of decision points as we move forward in this event,” Walsh said. “The decision clock has been rolling.”

If activated, the plan will be to artificially breach the levee in three places – one north and two south - by using of ammunition. The move will flood more than 130,000 acres of prime agriculture land in Missouri, but, the corps says, relieve pressure on a river system that has never experiences such high levels.

Walsh reported the Cairo river gauge - at the confluence of the great Mississippi and Ohio rivers - on Saturday afternoon was measuring 59.19 – not the highest ever recorded on the gauge but Walsh said it was close to the record of 59.5. The projection is that the level at Cairo will reach 60.5 for May 2 and 3.

“We’re keeping a close on that and we’re also keeping a close eye on the system,” he said. “This system has never been under this kind of pressure before and there’s different places where things are beginning to degrade. So we’re keeping track of the Cairo gauge and we’re also keeping track of the system.”

Walsh reported sand boils and seepage at a number of levees near the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, a condition that Walsh said also threatens the integrity of the total project. The sand boils and seepage weakens the integrity of the levee.

"There is water in  places where we have never ever seen it before," Walsh said.

U.S. Rep. Jo Ann Emerson, R-Cape Girardeau, was on hand for the briefing – one of her many stops in a day of checking on floodfighting throughout the region. She listened intently to what Walsh and other corps officials had to say – as well as to the area residents who attending. She was joined by State Rep. Ellen Brandom, R-Sikeston. Near the close of the briefing, a gentleman from the Commerce area asked Walsh about the integrity of the levee in his area and said he was trying to decide if he should move his family before flooding occurred at Commerce.

“What you tell me will determine my decision,” the man told Walsh.

Unlike other corps briefings this week that had a few members of area media in attendance, Saturday afternoon’s briefing was a “full house.” Several television outlets sent news crews, more newspapers joined the group of journalists, and a national

telephone network was set up for those not in Sikeston to participate. One reporter on the telephone hookup identified herself from CNN-News.

Photos Above: Major General Michael J. Walsh, Commander, Mississippi Valey Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and President, Mississippi River Commission

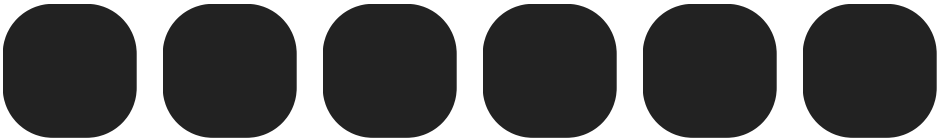
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