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Corps To Blast Levee Late Monday Night

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By Annabeth Miller, {br}ShowMe Times Editor

BIRDS POINT, Mo. - After a long and rainy day Monday, the Army Corps of Engineers announced it would finally happened. What everyone fighting and watching the Mississippi River flood this spring had been talking about – the Corps would blast a hole in the levee between Birds Point and New Madrid.

Maj. Gen. Michael Walsh announced late Monday afternoon on the levee near Birds Point that he issued the order to activate the floodway and blow three holes in the more than 30 miles of levee system. The first blast will be a three-mile wide breach at the northern end of the system near Birds Point.

“I've ordered the district commander to operate the project,” Walsh said in a matter-of-fact tone.

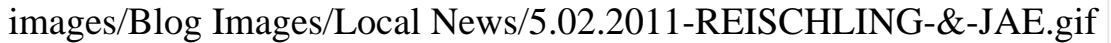
Walsh made his announcement on top the rain-drenched levee within sight of the “old” Mississippi River bridge near Cairo. A gaggle of media was on hand – metro television stations, national networks and news services, large daily newspapers – and local news journals, radio and television. The Corps inflated a bright yellow tent at an intersection Highway 60/62 and a county road so officials and media could escape the constant rain for the news event.

“Everyone I have talked with -- from boat operators, to laborers, scientists and engineers, and truck drivers have all said the same thing – ‘I never thought I would see the day that the river would reach these levels’,” Walsh said. He called this spring’s floods an “historic chocolate tide.”

Walsh said the Corps will blast the first of three holes in the levee between 9 p.m. Monday night and 12 midnight Tuesday morning.

He said he would prefer to blow the levee during the daylight but said they must detonate the explosives as soon as possible due to the weakening levee system. Walsh said the levee system needs relief as soon as possible from “enormous, unprecedented” pressure.

Walsh gave the order to activate the floodway to the Col. Vernie Reichling, commander of the Corps’ Memphis district. Reichling said crews began work on loading blasting agent into the pipes in the levee over the weekend. Crews were pulled from the work Sunday evening due to storms.

“You’re not going to see a  huge explosion,” said Reichling. “What you’re going to see is basically designed to uplift the levee and break it. The levee is designed with heavy clays; it is a very impenetrable structure. This explosive material was specifically designed to penetrate and loosen that up.”

For days the Corps has been trying to manage the flooding and to decide if activation of the flood plan originally written in 1928 should be activated. The only other time the flood plan has been activated was in the 1938 flood.

The multi-step plan will blow three holes in the levee system in Southeast Missouri, flooding more than 133,000 acres of prime agriculture land, destroying more than 100 homes and virtually destroying a way of life.

Local officials in Mississippi County as well as the Missouri National Guard have worked since the weekend to prepare residents of the region for evacuation. The Guard announced that they have completed evacuation the residents of the region, and only “had to escort” one individual from the area Monday afternoon.

"This doesn't end this historic flood," Walsh said. "This is just the beginning. This is just one floodway."

Photos Above: (top) Maj. Gen. Michael Walsh announced Monday afternoon he had issued the order to activate the Birds Point New Madrid Floodway late Monday night. (bottom) Vernie Reichling explains about the blasting of a plug in the levee at Birds Point as U.S. Rep. Jo Ann Emerson listens.

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