



[TOP](#)

# Big River - Little City

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***By Jo Ann Emerson***

The floods which have ravaged the Eighth Congressional District in Missouri and the midsection of the entire country are serious business. These storms and floods have killed hundreds of people, injured hundreds more, destroyed homes and businesses, and forever changed the topography of our part of the nation.

Entire communities are besieged by floodwaters, the flood protection system up and down the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers is under unprecedented strain, and we face a disaster of major proportion.

To read big-city newspapers, however, is to grossly misunderstand what is happening in our congressional district. They leave readers with the impression that flooding along the Mississippi River is the only cause for concern, leaving out inland floods like those along the White River, the Black River, and at Wappapello and Clearwater Lakes. Our congressional district is half the size of the state of Indiana, but today it is more appropriate to phrase the comparison differently: we are twice the size of Lake Erie.

Another simplification common to the national press coverage of the flooding of the New Madrid floodway is that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers faced a choice between saving people in Cairo, Illinois and farmland in Missouri. By that math, the choice ought to be easy, right? But in fact, there are communities in the New Madrid floodway where families make their homes, people go to work, and businesses have buildings and assets. From the agricultural activities in the New Madrid floodway, hundreds of millions of

dollars in economic value is added to our state.

A blogger/reporter from Time magazine even went so far as to say that blowing up the Birds Point levee and flooding 130,000 acres in Missouri was a good thing because “predominantly white and well-off landowners” would suffer while “predominantly black and poor residents of Cairo” would be saved. In Michael Grunwald’s ill-considered words, “This is a welcome reversal.” The word despicable comes to mind, but those remarks also sadden me for the residents of Pinhook, Missouri, the African-American community which is home to most all of the residents in the New Madrid floodway. For years and years, we have been fighting to improve the levees that would keep annual floodwaters out of Pinhook, water that forces children there to ride to school in flatbed trailers rather than buses. When Mr. Grunwald’s “justice” was served, their homes were destroyed. There is no better advertisement for the ignorance and insensitivity of mainstream media.

Finally, you might be tempted to believe from the headlines that the danger has passed, and this is not the case, either. Floodwaters remain at historic levels for historic durations. We will be anxiously watching weather forecasts for home and for upriver in weeks and maybe months to come. It will be a long time before floodwaters recede. Most serious is the fact that a strained flood protection system made up of levees, locks and dams is even further challenged by its age. The reluctance to modernize our system is the result of tough times for state, local and federal budgets, but the zealotry of environmental extremists who would rather revert our floodplain to fish habitat plays a role in public policy, too.

Fish and big-city newspapers are a pretty good pair. Maybe that’s how the “fish-wrap” got its name.

***Photo Above: Jo Ann Emerson listened - and watched - intently as Maj. Gen. Michael Walsh of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers announced he had issued the order that activated floodway and blew a breach in the river levee.***

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