



TOP

# Birds Point Farmland Recovering

NOVEMBER 07TH 2011 BY UNKNOWN

## Birds Point Farmland Recovering

*By Anthony Schick  
The Columbia Missourian*

MISSISSIPPI COUNTY — Six months after it was under water, the land behind the Birds Point levee blast is a patchwork of soybean fields.

Farmers are midway through harvest in the 130,000 acres of fertile Mississippi River bottom — land many thought would be unusable this season and would take years to recover after the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers breached the Birds Point levee on May 2.

Although homes, roads and other property in the Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway were damaged or destroyed by the flooding, the land itself recovered faster than anyone expected.

Floodwaters began subsiding in late May, and farmers were at work in their fields planting soybeans as early as the first of June.

Farmers planted soybeans along with some corn and milo on 90 to 95 percent of the land that was submerged, Sam Atwell, a University of Missouri Extension agronomist in New Madrid County, estimated. The flood caused permanent damage to less than 1 percent of the 130,000 acres, he said.

“The land itself came out better than we thought,” Atwell said. “You can’t imagine really swift water 30 feet deep going miles across fields and not hurting the land more than it did.”

He and most others in the spillway imagined a year without a harvest when the corps opted to open the floodway for the first time since 1937.

The corps’ plan, outlined in the Flood Control Act of 1928 and most recently updated in 1986, calls for blasting open portions of the Birds Point levee when the Mississippi River begins to overtop it. The spillway is designed to prevent unexpected levee failures at Cairo, Ill., and other locations up and down the river.

The decision to breach the levee was not without protest on the Missouri side of the river.

Missouri Attorney General Chris Koster filed a federal lawsuit April 26 in an attempt to halt the levee breach.

"The flooding would leave a layer of silt on the farmland that could take as much as a generation to clear, causing significant injury to the quality of the farmland for many years," a news release from Koster's office said.

The Supreme Court denied Missouri's challenge May 1. The next day, the corps blew the first section of the levee, followed soon after by a second and third blast.

The entire spillway was under water weeks after the levee blew. The farmland didn't flood gradually as it usually does, Atwell said; essentially, the full force of the Mississippi River hit the land.

The river washed away about 20,000 acres of winter wheat ready for harvest and soaked fields that were graded and ready for corn planting. For those with crop insurance, the federal government will cover farmers' losses for the costs of planting, according to statement from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

About half the farmers in the spillway do not have crop insurance because of the high cost, Atwell said. "Up near Columbia, crop insurance is a no-brainer," he said. "But in the floodway, many can't afford it."


The topsoil losses, high water and lost inputs led to grim predictions for the season's outcome.

In early June, at the request of Missouri congresswoman Jo Ann Emerson, the Food and Agricultural Policy Research Institute at MU estimated crop losses caused by the flooding. The institute assumed that no crops would be planted on any of the 130,000 acres in the floodway.

That estimate put farm losses at \$42.6 million — \$60.6 million before crop and disaster insurance payouts. The total economic decline from those crop losses would be near \$157 million, according to the institute.

Losses will not be near those numbers, though.

"I don't know what our losses are going to be, but it's definitely not going to be catastrophic except maybe in a few places," Atwell said.

  
Kevin Mainord, the mayor of East Prairie — which sits just outside the floodway — and sales and marketing director for MRM Ag Services, was among the most outspoken in opposition of the levee breach and its damage to Mississippi County.

"We didn't want our grounds, want our livelihood, want our houses, want our residences destroyed by the onslaught of water that came through the floodway," Mainord said in the video "Man Made: Disaster at Birds Point," which examines the corps' decision to breach the levee and the ensuing damage. "We feel like we were sacrificed," he said.

In mid-May, his land in the floodway was 20 feet under water.

Six months later, the teeth on Mainord's John Deere combine were littered with dried stalks and leaves from freshly harvested soybeans. Hundreds more acres awaited. Mainord farms about 2,800 acres in the center of the floodway, along with 4,500 outside of the floodway. He got all but 100 acres of his land in the floodway planted this year.

"I think a lot of farmers feel blessed to have a crop this year," he said.

Mainord was one of few farmers to plant several hundred acres of corn, which takes longer to mature than soybeans and wasn't an option in most places because of the late planting season.

Corn prices were at an all-time high in June, near \$7 per bushel.

"Farmers take losses a lot of years hoping to make it back with one good one," Mainord said. "If this was one of those years you had to make that profit, you lost those opportunities."

Opportunities might be higher next planting season, when the 10 percent or so of farmland that didn't get planted this year returns to production. Some of the badly flooded land returned this year.

The levee breach blew about a quarter of the levee into chunks on Robert Henry's farm, which starts at the base of the levee at the site of the second blast and runs west for about a quarter mile. The river tore about 150 tons of topsoil per acre from half of Henry's land, MU Extension scientists estimated. The tops of tree stumps are poking out of the ground in some places for the first time since he can remember.

Henry got all but 15 of his 1,000 acres replanted in July, and he said the rest will be back in production next season.

Henry, 62, has been farming in the spillway since he was 19. It cost him about \$80,000 more than usual to clear his land, level it and plant it in time. This season is the latest he's ever planted. He has about 800 to 900 acres of soybeans that won't be ready for another couple weeks.

This year's harvest is nearly a month late in the floodway and will run through the end of November, meaning it could get cut short by frost. Temperatures between 28 and 30 degrees for consecutive hours will damage beans, Mainord said.

Yields are in the range of 30 to 50 bushels per acre compared to 40 to 60 bushels per acre, yields farmers in the floodway have come to expect, Atwell said. Soybean harvests throughout Missouri are yielding an average of 37 bushels per acre, according to USDA statistics.

The status of the Birds Point levee has farmers anxious about future harvests, though, Mississippi County Farm Services Agency Director Dickey Jordan said.

The levee stood 61.5 feet before the breach. The corps expects to have a 51-foot temporary fix in place by Nov. 30 and recently announced \$3 million in funding to raise the levee to 55 feet. At that height, the river has a 6 percent chance of overtopping the levee at any time, the corps estimated.

Floodway insurance prices have risen because of the lowered levee, Jordan said.

The corps is seeking \$1 billion to repair damages in the Mississippi basin, \$75 million of which has been allocated. That means many projects, including restoring the levee to 61.5 feet, are on hold until Congress makes the money available.

"At first, farmers were anxious about not having a crop. Then they were anxious about yields, but they ended up with a crop," Jordan said. "But they're still looking at that levee not there, and they're still anxious. So they're thankful for what they've got."

*Editor's Note: This news report by Anthony Schick is reprinted with permission from the Columbia Missourian. Anthony is a graduate student in the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri - Columbia. He has been reporting on the flooding along the Mississippi River and the breach of the Birds Point levee since last spring. This article was published in the Columbia Missourian on Nov. 4, 2011.*

LAST UPDATED ON NOVEMBER 07TH 2011 BY UNKNOWN

<https://showmetimes.com/Blogpost/ukok/Birds-Point-Farmland-Recovering->

[Go to post](#)

More from ShowMe Times:



SUBSCRIBE TO "LOCAL NEWS"

**ShowMe Gold Sponsors**