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# BIG SUNFLOWER & YAZOO RIVERS

**THREAT: Wetland destruction, environmental injustice**

**STATES:** Mississippi

**AT RISK:** Wetlands; birds, fish, and wildlife; local communities

## SUMMARY

The Big Sunflower and Yazoo Rivers are home to an abundance of wetlands and habitats that support more than 450 species of birds, fish, and wildlife in the heart of the Mississippi Flyway. This special place, home to one of the last intact bottomland hardwood forests in America, is threatened by a harmful project known as the Yazoo Backwater Pumps. The project would damage thousands of acres of wetlands while reinforcing historical environmental and racial injustices for predominantly Black, impoverished communities. The Yazoo Pumps proposal was vetoed by EPA in 2008 due to their environmental impact. Unfortunately, the project was revived in 2021. Instead of reviving this costly, damaging pump proposal, EPA and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers should prioritize immediate, effective flood relief using nature-based and non-structural solutions to help local communities while conserving vital wetlands that provide natural flood protection and climate resilience.

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## THE RIVER

In the heart of the Mississippi Delta, the Big Sunflower River begins in Coahoma County and flows for 250 miles until it reaches the Yazoo River, a tributary of the Mississippi River. According to the EPA, the Big Sunflower supports some of the nation's "richest wetland and aquatic resources," including nearly 29 million migrating birds annually. Hunting, fishing and nature tourism fuel the state's annual \$3.37 billion-dollar outdoor recreation economy and the river is an area rich in culture and heritage. Many famous blues musicians launched their careers on the banks of the Big Sunflower, including Sam Cooke, Ike Turner, Muddy Waters, 2020 Grammy nominee Christone "Kingfish" Ingram, and more.

While agricultural production is common throughout the Big Sunflower and Yazoo River watersheds, nearly one-quarter of the region has been protected as public land or enrolled in conservation programs. Despite tens of thousands of acres of federal, state, and privately-owned conservation lands being protected in the Yazoo Backwater Area, agricultural water withdrawals, pollution, and development have had major impacts on the watershed since at least the 1970s.

## THE THREAT

The Big Sunflower and Yazoo Rivers are threatened by a destructive project known as the Yazoo Backwater Pumps. In 2008, the Corps agreed that a similar proposal would impact at least 67,000 acres of wetlands in the heart of the Mississippi Delta. In light of the Supreme Court's recent Sackett v. EPA decision, as well as the historic cumulative loss of 80 percent of wetlands and native forests in the Mississippi alluvial plain, the impacts of the Yazoo Pumps would be an astounding loss of critical habitat that cannot be reasonably mitigated.

Recently, the Corps has revived the pump project—and the impact to the environment and communities is substantial. Pumps would make wetlands drier and reduce the



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## TAKE ACTION:

[AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/  
BIGSUNFLOWERRIVER2024](https://AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/BIGSUNFLOWERRIVER2024)



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number of days fish can swim during crucial spawning seasons. This is especially problematic since aquatic life is already seeing regular die-offs in the area due in part to agriculture and water management decisions.

The pumps would reinforce historic racial and environmental injustices for some of the nation's poorest communities, especially for Sharkey and Issaquena Counties, which are 70-percent Black with poverty rates significantly higher than Mississippi's average and more than triple the national average. In the Corps' 2021 Pumps proposal, they acknowledged that, even had the pumps been

operating during the 2019 major flood event, 83 percent of the Yazoo Backwater lands that flooded would still have been underwater. Many local leaders and community members of color recognize that the pumps are a false promise that will not protect them from flooding. The Yazoo Pumps, that will likely cost federal taxpayers more than \$1.4 billion, would provide little protection to homes in the sparsely populated area that the pumps are supposed to protect, and could increase flooding in downstream communities.

## WHAT MUST BE DONE

Federal programs are funded and available today to help provide effective, economical, and environmentally sound protections for people's lives and property. These commonsense measures include elevating homes and roads, voluntary buyouts, and compensating farmers who volunteer to take their land out of production and restore it back to wetlands. Rural and urban communities across the U.S. are embracing these natural infrastructure and non-structural measures to provide immediate relief and manage long-term flood risk.

Like all Clean Water Act vetoes, EPA's original and renewed vetoes of the Yazoo Pumps were based on rigorous analysis of potential impacts and broad public input, and issued to permanently block construction of an exceptionally destructive project. In the wake of the Supreme Court's decision to limit protection of wetlands across the nation, it is critical that the public speak out to defend this ecologically significant place from destruction and defend the integrity of the Clean Water Act and its critical veto authority.

We must urge the Army Corps of Engineers to drop the pump project from the Yazoo plan; enact nature-based, non-structural flood solutions to protect people and the environment in lieu of the pumps; and protect the Clean Water Act Veto.