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MISSISSIPPI RIVER

THREAT: Increased flooding, inadequate disaster prevention and response

STATES: Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana

AT RISK: Public safety, river health

SUMMARY

The Mississippi is “America’s River,” flowing through the nation’s heartland, providing drinking water for 20 million people and supporting vital agriculture, industry, and recreation. But frequent and severe floods are threatening lives and businesses, while the river’s health declines. Communities along the river need significant support for disaster prevention and response, as well as river restoration – but the fate of the Federal Emergency Management Agency hangs in the balance. The Trump administration should modernize FEMA to improve river health and maximize the safety, security, and prosperity of Mississippi River communities.

THE RIVER

The Mississippi River flows 2,350 miles through ten states, with nearly 20 million people relying on it as their source of water. The entire Mississippi River Basin encompasses all or parts of 31 states and two provinces, and is home to roughly 70 million people. The water flows through the ancestral lands of the Ojibwe, Mdewakanton Dakota, Sioux, Sauk, Choctaw, and other Indigenous communities who continue to rely on the river’s abundance for sustenance, health, culture, and livelihood.

The Mississippi River supports a shipping industry worth approximately \$400 billion annually, and its broad, rich floodplain is vital to U.S. agriculture. It also drives a vibrant outdoor recreation economy that supports more than 400,000 jobs and generates approximately \$25 billion annually. The river provides vital habitat to many rare, threatened, and endangered species. It is a globally significant flyway, supporting approximately half of all North American waterfowl, and is home to nearly half of the duck hunters in the U.S., accounting for at least 40 percent of the nation’s annual duck harvest. And, it has been essential to American arts and culture, inspiring authors like Mark Twain, artists like George Catlin, and musicians like B.B. King and Muddy Waters.

THE THREAT

Changes to federal flood management agencies put the health of the Mississippi River at risk and jeopardizes the clean water and safety of those who live along and depend on it.

Flooding is the most costly and common natural disaster across the United States and certainly within the Mississippi River Basin. Increasingly frequent and severe floods have damaged homes, businesses, and agriculture, and pose an ongoing threat to public safety and clean water. The magnitude of major floods in the Basin has

SEAN PAVONE

MISSISSIPPI RIVER

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TAKE ACTION:

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increased in frequency and intensity, and recent floods have broken records for both size and duration, with the 2019 flood along the Mississippi, for example, inundating communities for over 100 days. The combined cost of that flood event to the United States was an estimated \$20 billion, and a dozen lives were lost.

In addition to the loss of life and financial impacts, there are often unseen damages to drinking water supplies, native plants and animals, and overall river health. In many communities, wastewater treatment plants are located in the floodplain, and flood damage leads to sewage spills, risking clean water and public health.

Much of the Mississippi has been

channelized between levees, cutting the river off from important floodplain and wetland habitat, which has further led to higher, longer, and more severe flooding.

Mississippi River communities require local, state, and federal agencies to work together to prepare for, respond to, and recover from floods. Federal agencies, like the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, produce flood risk maps, provide minimum standards to ensure development is safe from floods, and help homeowners rebuild on higher ground.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

The Trump administration is currently evaluating several of the federal agencies, including FEMA, that play a critical role in flood management. As the new FEMA Review Council conducts a needed review, it should focus on providing states and communities with necessary flood and disaster relief, while also ensuring the health of rivers and streams that are necessary for healthy communities to thrive.

It is essential that the federal government maintain a robust role in managing floods and other natural disasters since rivers know no borders. Core federal capabilities that must be maintained and improved include providing publicly available data related to flood risks, modernizing floodplain development standards to ensure investments are resilient to flooding, and improving granting efficiencies to help communities improve their resilience to floods faster.

There is significant room for improvement, and as extreme weather brings more flooding to river communities, a more effective and efficient FEMA is essential to helping communities prepare for, respond to, and recover from floods, while supporting a healthy and thriving Mississippi River.