



## Levees will be tested in the coming week and months as Missouri River rewrites the record books

By ALGIS J. LAUKAITIS / Lincoln Journal Star | Posted: Saturday, June 11, 2011 11:55 pm

The Missouri River will be rewriting the record books this coming week as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers continues to release unprecedented volumes of flood water from Gavins Point Dam near Yankton, S.D.

On Saturday, water was shooting through the dam's spillway at about 143,000 cubic feet per second.

By mid-week, that number will increase to 150,000 cfs and stay there through August, depending on conditions, said Monique Farmer, a spokesperson for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers office in Omaha. She said the agency expects a 4- to 6-foot rise on the river.

"Picture 150,000 basketballs being dropped every second," is how Nebraska Emergency Management Assistant Director Al Berndt described the water flowing from Gavins Point Dam.

The Corps projects the following flood stages for major cities and towns downstream from Gavins Point Dam by mid-week (figures could change with above normal rainfall):

- \* Sioux City, flood stage is 30 feet (record crest not available), could reach 35 to 37 feet.
- \* Blair, flood stage 26.5 feet, record crest of 33.5 feet set in 1952, could reach 32 to 34 feet.
- \* Omaha, flood stage is 29 feet, record crest of 40.2 feet set in 1952, could reach 34 to 36 feet.
- \* Nebraska City, flood stage is 18 feet, record crest of 27.19 feet set in 1993, could reach 27 feet or more.
- \* Brownville, flood stage is 33 feet, record crest of 44.3 feet set in 1993, could reach, 44 feet or more.
- \* Rulo, flood stage is 17 feet, record crest of 26.6 feet set last year, could reach 27 feet or more.

Berndt said he has never experienced that much water coming down the river in his 11 years with the state agency. He said the Missouri River's levee system will be tested as never before.

The Corps of Engineers has assured the public the six major dams on the Missouri River are safe.

"There is no evidence to suggest an emergency situation at any of our dams, and all projects are operating within their design parameters," said Col. Robert J. Ruch, commander of the Corps' Omaha district, in a news release.

Ruch noted that all six dams have experienced similar pool levels several times over their service life.

"Our elevated surveillance on these dams has not revealed any significant issues or concerns regarding operation at these high pools and or record releases," he said.

NEMA officials plan to continue watching levees for any signs of damage. Many reaches of the river have not experienced flows this high since the dams were built in the 1950s.

They'll also keep an eye of roads and bridges, sewage and water treatment plants and other public infrastructure. Berndt said plans are being made to ask President Barack Obama for a disaster declaration to cover preliminary disaster work.

A key concern is the water treatment plant at Plattsmouth, which provides water to 6,800 residents and the surrounding area. Berndt said the state is prepared to bring in water if necessary.

Cass County Emergency Manager William Cover said drinking water also could be supplied to Plattsmouth and other communities from the rural water district, which is tied into the city's system. He said there won't be enough water available to wash cars or water lawns.

"We are prepared as we can be," Cover said when asked if Cass County is ready for what's coming down the river.

He said most of the 40 year-round households at Lake Waconda have evacuated and the rest have stored their personal belongings and are ready to go at a moment's notice. Two families have chosen to stay and he has told them the county can't help them if they get in trouble.

Lake Waconda residents also have stockpiled 24,000 sandbags on pallets in case there are any breaches, he said.

Rising flood waters already have breached levees near Hamburg, Iowa, and Decatur, forced hundreds of people from their homes, closed down businesses and marshaled an army of paid workers and volunteers into sandbagging operations up and down the river.

Cover said the levees are the biggest concern. He said the flood stage at Plattsmouth is 26 feet, and in 1993, it reached a record of 35.5 feet. By mid-week, the river is projected to hit 37 feet.

"I don't think anybody anywhere can tell anyone that any of the levees will be able to hold long-term -- two or three months with water on the levees themselves," he said.

Cover said levees are designed to hold back water a few days or weeks. He said they are not designed to withstand constant pressure for months.

"Basically, they've been turned into river banks for the bulk of the summer," Cover said. "Next week is critical on how high it's going to get. The issue is how long it stays beyond the design figures of the levees."