

EPA says flood control project not subject to previous veto

December 5 2020, by Emily Wagster Pettus

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency does not object to a revised proposal for a massive flood-control project to pump water from parts of the Mississippi Delta, a regional administrator for the agency says.

That's significant because the EPA vetoed the Yazoo Backwater Project in 2008.

On Oct. 16, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers published a draft of a new environmental impact statement that supports the [project](#), reversing the Corps' own previous report that had said the project would hurt wetlands.

Mary S. Walker, an EPA regional administrator in Atlanta, [wrote](#) Monday that the Corps of Engineers' new proposal "provides information and analysis regarding a similar but different Yazoo Pumps Project than was previously analyzed."

Walker wrote that the current version of the project, which calls for pumps at Deer Creek north of Vicksburg, is not subject to the EPA's 2008 veto. The vetoed plan proposed pumps in other locations.

EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler said in April 2019 that the agency would reconsider the decision that blocked the project. The Corps of Engineers' recent impact statement said new research shows the project is "not anticipated to convert any wetlands into non-wetlands."

Environmental groups remain opposed to the Yazoo Backwater Project. They've said for decades that it would be an expensive boondoggle that would hurt wetlands to help agribusiness.

American Rivers, Audubon Mississippi, Healthy Gulf and Mississippi Sierra Club said in a joint statement Wednesday: "The EPA's last-ditch effort to modify the veto and greenlight the Yazoo pumps project defies the science, sidesteps the law, and undermines critical protections Americans hold dear for all of our nation's natural resources."

The Corps held an online public hearing about the project Nov. 10, and it gathered public comments through Monday.

Kent Parrish is the Corps' senior project manager for the project. He said the Yazoo Backwater Area covers 4,093 square miles (10,601 square kilometers), starting just north of Vicksburg and going up to where Mississippi Highway 12 bisects the Delta. The Corps has said the area has experienced significant flooding during nine of the past 10 years, including a 2019 flood that lasted several months.

Mississippi politicians have been pushing the Trump administration to revive and fund the project that has been estimated to cost more than \$400 million. When the EPA vetoed the project in 2008 under Republican President George W. Bush, the agency said "adverse impacts on wetlands and their associated fisheries and wildlife resources are unacceptable."

The late Sen. John McCain, a Republican from Arizona, once called the pumps "one of the worst projects ever conceived by Congress," and opponents say pushing water out of the south Delta could cause worse flooding downstream along the Mississippi River.

Among the Mississippi politicians supporting the project are Sens. Roger

Wicker and Cindy Hyde-Smith and Gov. Tate Reeves, who are all Republicans; and Democratic U.S. Rep. Bennie Thompson, whose congressional district includes the areas that would be most affected.

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