
III. Americas Report

Severe Flooding Hits U.S. Farm Belt, Atop Economic Crisis

by Marcia Merry Baker

March 25—Major parts of the huge Mississippi-Missouri River Basins system are now under water from the combined effects of lack of infrastructure, and the confluence of heavy rains, snowmelt and this month's multi-state "bomb cyclone" storm. The severe damage affects a large area in the heart of the farm belt—from South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, and Missouri, south to

Louisiana. Wisconsin and other states are also hit. Overall, the flooding and debris impact will continue into May.

The disaster is all the worse in this region, as it comes on top of an ongoing crisis in agriculture, a result of the combined effect of several years that farmers' prices have been below their costs of produc-



Missouri Army National Guard/Alex Flynn

Preventable flooding has again brought vast destruction to the physical economy in the Missouri-Mississippi River Basins. Shown here is a major highway intersection underwater in Valley Park, Missouri on December 30, 2015.



USAF/Rachelle Blake

Catastrophic flooding in Nebraska has wiped out roads, overtopped dams, and left at least a third of the Offutt Air Force Base, near Omaha, submerged as of March 17, 2019.

tion, and the increasing consolidation of food control (processing, concentration of production, etc.). The lack of infrastructure shows up in all respects—transportation, water management, medical services, as well as disaster defenses. This reflects the impact of decades of government policy run to serve Wall Street/City of London financial gains, not the national interest.

The significant question posed to the nation by the epic farm belt floods, is: Will the principle of the American System be restored, to see that the government once again intervenes to enable infrastructure and a sound food and farming sector, and deals with all other aspects of sustaining a productive nation, in the context of productive international relations?

One prominent farm leader puts this in terms of getting the United States into the worldwide development drive—the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—which will have its second international forum next month in China. South Dakota farm leader Ron Wiczorek, who ran for his state’s Congressional seat in 2018, sent a special message out to his networks this weekend, about the flooding and farm crisis. The La-

Rouche PAC-endorsed candidate said:

The only engine powerful enough to stop the farm crisis is for President Trump to bring the USA into the “One Belt One Road”—100 nations are already on board, and we have a standing invitation to join.

Wiczorek’s mid-term election campaign made a big point of exposing how Russiagate all along was a British-instigated geopolitical scheme, to hem in Trump



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U.S. map showing the major Midwest river basins.

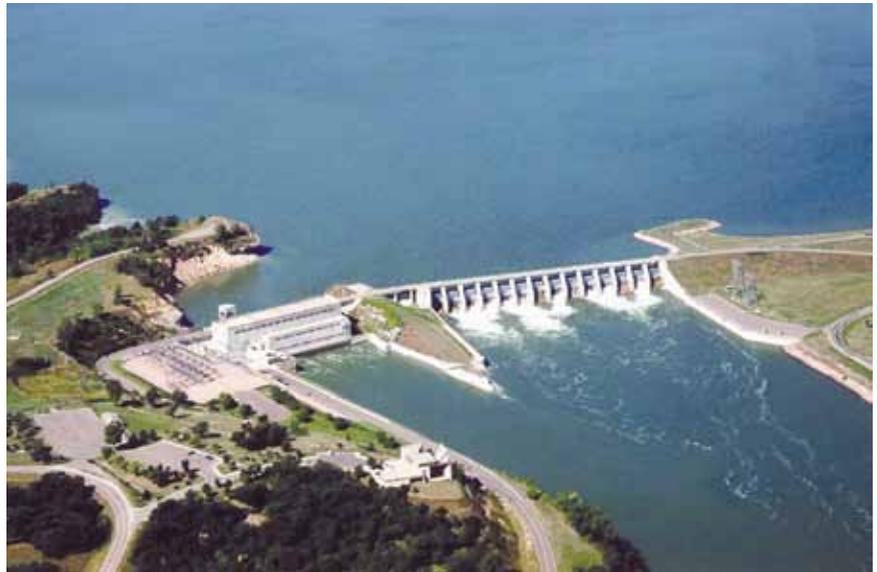
and the United States from developing new diplomatic and economic relations for the common good among the U.S., Russia, China and other nations. Building infrastructure-corridors of development in the Americas—disaster protection, modern rail, nuclear power—is the context in which all the apparently insoluble conflicts we face today can be resolved, from the question of migrants, to the matter of a productive future for Venezuela without British regime-change.

Flooding Dimensions

Floodwaters are still cresting at points down the lower Missouri, and the Mississippi River has yet to see its peak flows. This region is huge in size, and accounts for a large part of the nation’s crops, especially soy and corn, and livestock—cattle and hogs. The damage is vast to every kind of essential infrastructure in the multi-state region: railroads, highways, and bridges, as well as schools, commercial buildings and homes.

So far 42 wastewater treatment plants in Nebraska are flooded. On March 14, the Spencer Dam gave way on the Niobrara River. Nine major levee breaches have occurred along the Missouri River itself. Transportation in the flooded areas is entirely disrupted. In Nebraska, 200 miles of roadway are completely gone, and hundreds more miles are still under water or badly damaged. Eleven main bridges are destroyed, and even where flood waters have receded, long detours are in effect. Hundreds of miles of gravel roads, the standard in rural areas, are washed out completely, taking out the culverts and underground cables as well.

In Iowa as of March 22, a long stretch of the north-south Interstate 29 highway along the Missouri River remained impassable and closed, requiring a 100-mile detour via Des Moines to go from Sioux City, Iowa, south to Kansas City. Amtrak has suspended all service across southern Iowa, which uses the Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) tracks, now unsafe. BNSF spokesmen say they are re-directing all their regional freight movement, and can’t say when they can restore service until the floodwater recedes. The flooding of prime



USACE

The Gavins Point Dam and hydroelectric power plant on the Missouri River, near Yankton, South Dakota.

farm land brings problems of scouring, and deposition of sand, chemicals and debris. Emergency high-ground locations were set up for livestock that could be moved in time, but thousands of head of cattle and hogs have perished. Carcasses are visible floating or jammed up into huge piles by the force of the water.

A full damage assessment is still not possible. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Contingency Director toured much of the Nebraska-Iowa-South Dakota Missouri River region by helicopter beginning March 20, and emergency work is now proceeding in key places. In Nebraska alone, for example, major breaches have occurred in the 350 miles of levees along the Missouri River, the Platte and Elkhorn Rivers, and their tributaries. The USACE has rushed to shore up the Union Dike Levee near Valley, Nebraska.

On March 21, President Trump approved Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts’ request to declare the state a Federal disaster area. The White House statement declared that since March 9, the state has suffered an emergency from the “severe winter storm, straight-line winds and flooding.” On March 23, President Trump affirmed a Federal disaster declaration for 56 of 99 counties in Iowa. More declarations are expected.

Big Infrastructure Works!

During the course of this disaster, one positive feature stands out: Big infrastructure works. Nebraska’s

Cooper Nuclear Station is operating safely at full power at its site in Brownville, along the Missouri River, after preparations for flooding functioned properly.

In South Dakota, the Gavins Point Dam and power generation plant are operating fully on the Missouri River. The 1957 structure (a rolled earthen and chalkstone embankment) is also providing a critical river crossing, via the Crest Road over the dam, while the nearby Highway 121 bridge is undergoing flood repair. This connectivity is critical for the greater Yankton, S.D. region.

These examples are part of what was to be an integrated system of water, power and development projects for the entire Missouri River Basin, but it was never fully built out. Instead, this productive basin has been subject to repeated flood devastation. In 1944 the Pick-Sloan Missouri Basin Project—named after its two design engineers, Gen. Lewis A. Pick and William Glenn Sloan—was put forward.

When completed, it was to have 147 multi-purpose dams and reservoirs (for flood control, power, irrigation, recreation); 38 hydro-power plants; a navigation channel nine feet deep and 300 feet wide, all the way from St. Louis on the Mississippi, up to Sioux City, Iowa; and continuous levees for 1,500 miles, and more. (See *EIR*, June 10, 2011, “No More Floods! Build the Missouri River Development Project,” by Anthony De-Franco, pp. 13-27.)

Only a portion of the Pick-Sloan Plan was ever built. After certain key, up-river dams were constructed, e.g., Gavins Point and others, the full plan languished. Moreover, the design had envisioned many related projects to upgrade land resources, which were also never done. The Missouri is nicknamed the Big Muddy because of its turbidity—the sediment load in its flow. To counter this, Pick-Sloan called for planting five-million acres of trees (equivalent to the area of Massachusetts), building 2.5 million acres of shelterbelt tree rows to counter wind erosion; and constructing two-million acres of terraces to deter top-soil loss from farm fields. William Sloan foresaw thousands of new farms, new cities and industrial centers.

But, like the continental-scale North American Water and Power Alliance (NAWAPA) project to upgrade the resource base all across western North America, all of these projects were blocked. It is time to resume the construction of these big projects.

Instead of pursuing the Big Projects approach—as the Franklin Roosevelt Administration had done—U.S. policy after World War II came under control of the City of London/Wall Street policy of casino economics—financial speculation, deregulation, and outsourcing. Moreover, the green-movement wing of Wall Street argued that the American West must renounce dams, let the bison return, and drive out people.

Farm Crisis

Even before the latest, preventable flooding disaster, an extreme economic crisis had already been gripping this region. One marker of that is debt. Independent farm household debt levels and bankruptcies are surging in the Midwest states, and worry and suicide rates are high. This was described Feb. 27 by the usually sunny Sonny Perdue, Agriculture Secretary, in his testimony to the House Agriculture Committee. He said,

Farm debt has been rising more rapidly over the last five years, increasing by 30% since 2013—up from \$315 billion to \$409 billion, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture data, and up from \$385 billion in just the last year—to levels seen in the 1980s.

There has been a surge in farm household bankruptcies under Chapter 12 of the Federal Code, which was first devised expressly for agriculture operations during the 1980s, when farm foreclosures were soaring. At that time, Wall Street interests muscled Washington to disallow any debt moratoria, or resumption of parity pricing, which would have stopped the crisis. So instead, Chapter 12 was created. But many farmers are walking away altogether, or worse.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report that the rate of suicide among farmers is the highest in the nation. The new five-year farm law, in effect since January, calls for setting up suicide-prevention helplines and other measures for rural residents. The National Farmers Union (NFU) wants to go even further. In a March 25 statement, the NFU calls for funding of \$10 million in FY 2020 for the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network. The NFU reports, “Net farm income in 2018 was nearly 50 percent less than it was in 2013.”

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