

## FROM A1

## CORPS • FROM A1

Army Corps official says heavy rainfall in Montana and Wyoming upset projections for Missouri River

The record releases, which have not yet reached their maximum, have breached levees, triggered evacuations and spurred furious planning in the St. Louis region. The high flows are scheduled to continue into August.

Last week, a unified Missouri congressional delegation invited an Army Corps general to their state with a pointed message from Missourians “who believe this disaster could have been mitigated with better planning and coordination on the part of the Corps of Engineers.”

Upriver, anger has risen with the water. Two former South Dakota governors, both Republicans, accused the corps last week of failing to keep flexibility to handle the spring rains and heavy snowmelt.

One of the former governors, Bill Janklow, characterized the corps as “slow-witted.” Another ex-governor, Mike Rounds, asserted in an interview Friday that corps brass ought to be held accountable for rising water threatening his state and his own home.

“I’m muddy, I’m wet,” said Rounds, after returned from checking on water lapping at his evacuated home, near Pierre.

“You can’t come into May with so much water in the upper reservoirs knowing that you have significant snowpack on the ground and assuming it will not rain,” said Rounds, who left office in January after two terms.

#### ‘ASTOUNDING’ WATERS

The Corps of Engineers is accustomed to taking heat, although usually in times of drought, when the Dakotas and Missouri renew their decades-long battle over who taps America’s longest river.

Since the 1940s, the corps has been in charge of a system of “mainstem” dams authorized after an epic battle in Congress aimed at controlling a tempestuous river known for wreaking damage across the country. The Flood of 2011 — what the corps is calling the rising water — involved a big rain that forced a sudden diversion from Army engineers’ Master Manual, a court-tested document that serves as the bible of Missouri River management.

From its Reservoir Control Center in suburban Omaha, corps officials made calculations several weeks ago that are worrying people now at both ends of the river. The flows charted by the corps derive from the manual’s water control plan, which sets reservoir depths and dam releases after taking stock of rain and melting snow in the basin’s 541,000 square miles.

A 2011 plan was set. Then came the weekend of May 20.

Montana is a dry state with an average rainfall of 13.6 inches — less than half of what Missouri gets. But on that single weekend, large swaths of Montana



CHRIS MANGAN • Capital Journal/Associated Press  
Members of the South Dakota National Guard inspect the water level at a levee last week in southeast Pierre, S.D. The level has been rising as more water is released from Missouri River dams.

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and Wyoming got between 5 and 8 inches, a profound drenching that deposited millions of acre-feet of water in upstream reservoirs. A single acre-foot would cover a football field with 12 water inches deep.

“An astounding amount of water,” Ruch said.

Jody Farhat, chief of river management in the corps’ Omaha office, recalls how “we watched it all weekend, and when we went to work on Monday, we reported up the line that this was a game-changer.”

Critics note that the system was bulging with water before the rain.

Ruch responds by citing the dictates of the corps’ operating manual, which prescribes river priorities for a host of uses beyond flood control, among them navigation, recreation, wildlife and hydropower.

“We’re within the parameters of that document in how the system is being run,” he asserted.

Referring to complaints from Missouri, he added: “If someone comes up to us afterward and says it needs to be run in a different way, 100 percent for flood control, and asks could we do that, the answer is yes. Would people accept bathtubs in the upper basin? Probably not.”

By that he meant that to create more space in the reservoirs to capture more spring runoff, it would require reducing the amount of water for other uses such as showering — something upstream residents would not abide.

In Fort Pierre, S.D., the town’s 87-year-old mayor, Sam Tidball, said Friday that such arguments aren’t resonating with fearful people in his community.

“The local corps staff has been tremendous to work with, but the management of the river has some people downright angry. We’re not accustomed to being flooded here,” he said.

#### ASSESSING AGING DAMS

With water cascading down the Missouri like never before, questions are popping up about the ability of dams to handle it.

At Gavins Point Dam in eastern South Dakota, the major dam nearest to St. Louis, the flow was turned up this weekend to 145,000 cubic feet per second, and is scheduled to reach a peak of 150,000 on Tuesday. This time of year, the river typically flows through the dam at a velocity of around 30,000 cubic feet per second.

In an opinion column last week in the Post-Dispatch that got heavy readership along the river, Bernard Shanks, an author and former U.S. Geological Survey official, offered a frightening scenario of dam failure. He theorized a “domino effect” of catastrophic failures of dams more than a half-century old, triggering a flood of biblical proportions that would consume bridges and split the nation in two.

In an interview, Shanks, who also headed the Washington state Fish and Wildlife Department, said that he has studied Missouri River dams throughout his career and is writing a book about them. He has not been in-

involved in their operation.

“I don’t want to frighten people, but I want them to appreciate that dams are like our bridges and highways that are falling apart,” he said.

Shanks’ article was read in Omaha, too. Ruch began his remarks at an evening briefing with state, local and tribal leaders by asserting that he had visited all six dams recently and personally vouched for their integrity.

John Bertino, chief of the engineering division in the Omaha District, said that seismic studies were conducted at the dams as recently as 2005 and that an intense monitoring program is under way. He said that the corps meets annually with state emergency management officials along the river so that “everyone is prepared and they know what to do” in the event of dam failure.

Speaking of Shanks’ warnings, Ruch said: “There’s virtually no chance of overtopping those dams” — the biggest threat. “This is just not a scenario that’s going to play out.”

Ruch summed up his biggest concern about the unfolding water drama in a single word: “Precipitation. That is 100 percent of what I’m concerned with,” he said, echoing the worry of St. Louis area planners.

Ruch added that he is eager to get beyond this high-water season to look at how to improve the aging levee system. He declined to directly address an assertion last week by U.S. Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., that an earmark moratorium in Congress has led to difficulties in getting funds for levee repair.

“Are you trying to get me to touch the third rail there?” Ruch joked.

“We really need to figure how things need to be operated better. But right now, I’m concerned about people’s lives and property,” he said.