



REPLY TO
ATTENTION OF

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
CORPS OF ENGINEERS, NORTHWESTERN DIVISION
PO BOX 2870
PORTLAND OR 97208-2870

MAR 08 2012

FEB 24 2012

Missouri River Basin Water Management Division

Honorable Adrian Smith
United States House of Representatives
503 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Smith:

Thank you for your letter February 10, 2012, concerning the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) authority to update release schedules for the Missouri River reservoirs and the importance of keeping stakeholders apprised of the flood control situation throughout this runoff season. Responses to the five questions raised in your letter are provided below:

1. While the Master Manual outlines the broad principles and objectives of system operation for the Missouri River, how is real time regulation of the River carried out on a day-to-day basis?

The Missouri River Mainstem Reservoir System, which includes 6 dams, is operated in accordance with the Master Manual. The Master Manual is a water control plan that helps guide how much water should be released, when, and for how long from the 6 reservoirs to serve the Congressionally authorized project purposes. As the runoff season unfolds, long-range reservoir regulation forecasts are updated on a monthly basis, and the shorter-term, daily reservoir regulation forecast is updated weekly or more frequently if needed. Final release decisions for the six mainstem reservoirs are made each day using real time observed and forecasted streamflow, precipitation, snowpack and other data.

2. Does the Corps currently have authority, under the Master Manual, to make decisions about releases from upstream reservoirs on a daily or weekly, versus monthly, basis, or is legislative action from Congress needed to allow for more timely management?

The Master Manual does not prescribe daily releases from the reservoirs; rather it acknowledges that release decisions will be made on a daily or weekly basis. The actual operation of the reservoir system is reviewed and, if required, adjusted on a daily basis depending on current and forecasted conditions using the best information and tools available. While these release decisions are generally within the guidelines outlined in the Master Manual, the Corps also has the authority to deviate from the Master Manual to respond to changed conditions or unforeseen circumstances. Congressional action is not needed to allow more timely management of the reservoir system.

3. Has the Corps established a coordinated method of updating stakeholders on decisions and assessments of the runoff situation moving forward?

As part of our efforts to communicate more frequently and more broadly with stakeholders in the basin, the Corps initiated twice-monthly informational conference calls beginning in January 2012 to discuss conditions on the ground, runoff forecasts, and current and forecasted reservoir levels and releases. Additionally, we include updates of the infrastructure repair activities to ready the entire system for the 2012 runoff season. NOAA's Climate Prediction Center also participates on the calls to provide the latest long range climate forecasts. The calls are geared toward Congressional delegations, Tribes, state, county and local officials, and the media. Audio files of the calls are available to the public on the Corps' website. As in the past, we continue to provide regular monthly press releases and special press releases, as needed. In addition we will hold spring public meetings throughout the basin during the week of April 16. Real time and forecasted data is also available on our website.

4. If the Corps were to prioritize downstream flooding along the Missouri River system over other water management concerns, what effects would this have on all other authorized purposes, especially in more temperate or dry years in the basin?

Flood control is the only authorized purpose that requires empty space in the reservoirs; all other purposes are served by holding water in the reservoirs or by releasing water from the reservoirs. Therefore, if additional flood control space were provided in the mainstem reservoir system, service to the other seven purposes, would be impacted. The effects of maintaining lower reservoir levels would be particularly detrimental during periods of extended drought. As reservoir levels and releases decline during droughts, access to water for irrigation, water supply and recreation becomes more difficult; water quality declines requiring higher levels of treatment, fisheries are stressed, and service to navigation is reduced. Because hydropower generation is a function of both the amount of water released and the reservoir elevation (head on the turbine), less hydropower would be produced even if the same amount of water was released. The 2011 runoff year was a new data point that we need to analyze to determine if a change to the amount of space allocated to flood control should be considered. A change in allocation would of course, require public involvement to determine the extent of the effects on other project purposes.

5. Given the extraordinary nature of conditions which led to the events, is it possible we would expect an inverse situation, or drought, in only a few years?

Climatic conditions in the Missouri River basin can change dramatically from year to year with little advance warning. Case in point, despite the historic runoff in the basin last year, conditions are currently much drier than normal. Precipitation has averaged below normal over most of the basin since last fall, mountain snowpack is slightly below normal, and there is essentially no plains snowpack. The latest Drought Monitor indicates abnormally dry conditions in North Dakota and

much of South Dakota, with moderate to severe drought in eastern South Dakota and northwest Iowa. These indicators are not necessarily harbingers of the next drought, but certainly indicate how quickly conditions can change. I would also point out that the previous high runoff period in the 1990's, which included three of the top ten wettest years (1995, 1996, and 1997), was followed by the most severe drought in the basin since the reservoir system first filled in 1967. As a result of the 2000-2007 drought, storage in the reservoir system reached a historic low in February 2007, a mere five years ago.

I understand the importance of the Missouri River to the citizens of Nebraska and appreciate your commitment to raise these issues on their behalf. If you or your staff has any questions, please feel free to contact me or Ms. Jody Farhat, Chief of Missouri River Basin Water Management Division, at (402) 996-3840.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John R. McMahon", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

John R. McMahon
Brigadier General, US Army
Division Commander