

# SPECIAL MENTION: MISSISSIPPI RIVER

ARKANSAS, ILLINOIS, IOWA, KENTUCKY, LOUISIANA, MINNESOTA, MISSISSIPPI,  
MISSOURI, TENNESSEE, WISCONSIN

**THREAT: MASSIVE FLOODING**  
**AT RISK: COMMUNITIES AND HEALTHY FLOODPLAINS**

PHOTO: GAIL DESJARDIN

## Summary

The Mississippi River is a critical source of water for 18 million people, a diverse habitat for wildlife, an important commerce corridor, and a rich part of our country's heritage. Recently, massive flooding throughout the Mississippi River Basin has devastated communities, and highlighted the urgent need for 21<sup>st</sup> century flood protection solutions. Congress and federal regulators must prioritize natural flood management approaches to ensure that levees are not the only line of defense. We must invest in natural defenses like healthy wetlands and floodplains to protect communities and lessen catastrophic damages in the future.

## The River

At the core of the largest river system in North America, the Mississippi River runs through America's heartland from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. The Mississippi drains 41% of the contiguous United States, and is the third largest watershed in the world. More than 70 million people live in the Mississippi River Basin, and more than 18 million people and 50 cities rely on the Mississippi for drinking water.

The Mississippi River sustains a \$12.6 billion shipping industry, \$21.4 billion tourism industry, and produces 92% of the nation's agricultural exports. The inspiration for literary classics and musical genres, the Mississippi runs deep in American history and culture. The river is home to more species of mammals, birds, and fish than any other watershed in North America.

## The Threat

The recent devastating flooding along the Mississippi River challenges us to find new ways to manage our rivers. We have over-engineered our rivers, destroyed wetlands and floodplains, and failed to invest in adequate defenses. Billions have been spent on dams, levees, and other flood control structures, giving people who live in these otherwise dangerous places a false sense of security. While levees and floodwalls will continue to make sense in some heavily populated areas, their overuse actually causes flood levels to rise as the river



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channel is narrowed and water has nowhere to go but up. Flood damages have continued to steadily increase nationwide, costing taxpayers, families, businesses, and the environment.

Making matters worse, we have completely ignored our natural defenses. A floodplain with trees, natural vegetation, or flood tolerant crops is much more useful in soaking up rainfall and storing floodwaters than row crop agriculture or pavement. We have allowed these important resources, which also filter pollution from our water and provide habitat for wildlife, to be destroyed. The destruction of 35 million acres of wetlands — an area the size of Illinois — in the upper Mississippi River basin alone has increased flood risks to cities and farms downstream. The system of floodways and bypasses ensures flood protection when it is needed most, but we need an integrated approach that looks comprehensively at the whole Mississippi River basin for more areas that can provide storage naturally. A 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to flood protection depends on investing in our natural defenses and ensuring that levees are a last line of defense.

### What Must Be Done

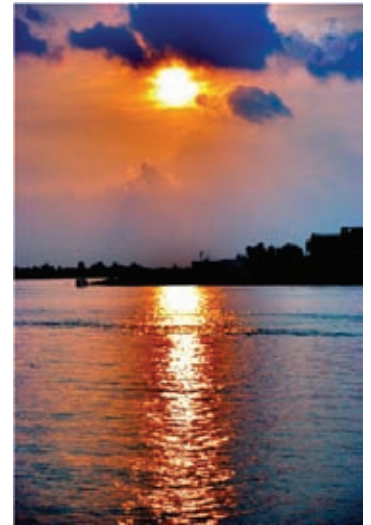


PHOTO: CHRISTIAN BANCK



PHOTO: DAN ANDERSON, EPA

Amid widespread damage, our immediate focus should be on protecting victims and helping communities recover. However, we must also take this opportunity to implement modern solutions that better protect communities, and that means investing in natural defenses like healthy wetlands and floodplains. Currently, the Administration has an unparalleled opportunity to establish Principles and Guidelines for our federal water resources projects so that they protect the public and the environment, and improve the economic vitality of communities. We are urging the administration to seize this opportunity to prioritize nonstructural solutions.

Additionally, the upcoming Farm Bill presents a chance to invest in agricultural conservation programs that protect and restore wetlands and floodplains. Congress and the Department of Agriculture should ensure that funding is available to replicate model projects like the Iowa River Corridor, which gives landowners and farmers incentives to restore wetlands in exchange for payment and to experiment with land uses besides traditional row crops.

The scenes of devastation in Mississippi River communities should be a call to action. By making the right investments in how we plan our federal water resources projects and how we invest in agricultural conservation programs, we will not only weather future storms and improve public safety, we will ultimately save money and enjoy all of the benefits healthy rivers provide.

### For More Information:

Shana Udvardy  
American Rivers  
(404) 275-9818  
sudvardy@americanrivers.org

Jennifer Browning  
Mississippi River Network  
(773) 496-4306  
jrbrowning@biodiverse.org

PHOTO: NASA, BEFORE FLOOD (LEFT) AND AFTER FLOOD (RIGHT)

