



# News Release

## US Army Corps of Engineers®

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**Release #:** 04-24

**For Release:** October 21, 2004

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## **The Mississippi River Commission: Celebrating 125 years of listening, inspecting and partnering on the Mississippi River**

VICKSBURG, MISS., October 21, 2004 -- The Mississippi River Commission (MRC) is celebrating 125 years of listening, inspecting, and partnering on the Mississippi River. The MRC has a proud heritage that dates back to 1879, when Congress established the seven-member Commission to remake the Mississippi River into a reliable commercial artery while protecting adjacent farms and towns from powerful floods. Today the MRC has realized part of its ambitious assignment through the prosecution of the comprehensive river management program known as the Mississippi River and Tributaries (MR&T) project—arguably the most successful civil works project undertaken. Since the initiation of the project in 1928, the nation has received a \$24 return for every dollar invested, including savings on transportation costs and flood damages. The work remaining to be completed on the project will have an estimated 37 to 1 return of investment.

The 1879 congressional legislation that created the MRC granted the body extensive authority and jurisdiction on the Mississippi River from its headwaters at Lake Itasca, Minnesota, to the Head of Passes near the Gulf of Mexico. The legally mandated membership of the MRC called for three officers from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, one member from the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey (now the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), and three civilians—each nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate. This splendid mix of membership reflected a national desire to mend a burgeoning schism between the military and civilian engineering communities epitomized during the early 1870s through the famous public clashes between Brigadier General Andrew A. Humphreys, the Chief of Engineers, and James B. Eads, the internationally renowned civilian engineer and original member of the MRC.

While there were many reasons for creating the MRC, one of the most pressing issues involved the need for federal assistance for the flood-plagued Mississippi Valley. For decades prior to the establishment of the Commission, the national legislature had toyed with the concept of federalizing flood-control efforts, but opponents to that movement argued that the U.S. Constitution did not grant the federal government the authority to protect private property from overflow.

## 2-2-2/MRC Celebrating

This argument consistently won the day, and flood control remained a function of the individual states. In response, local interests at the state and county level organized levee districts. These insufficiently financed efforts, however, lacked centralized coordination and mostly proved inadequate because, as noted by James P. Kemper, a longtime student of the Mississippi River, “floodwaters will not respect political boundaries.”

With the establishment of the MRC, the federal government finally appeared as an active agent on the river capable of transcending the regional issues that had hampered the development of a more effective flood-control system. Shortly after its creation, the MRC began coordinating local efforts, setting standards for levee construction and allocating funds to the cash-strapped levee districts. In that process of face-to-face interaction and open dialogue, the MRC evolved into a springboard for Mississippi Valley interests to have a greater voice in shaping federal policy. In fact, it can be argued that the practice of addressing issues and concerns through the formal public hearing process, so critical in the federal government's civil works mission today, began in the Mississippi Valley with the creation of the MRC.

If the MRC is the springboard for giving vested interests a greater voice in shaping federal policy, then the motor vessel *Mississippi V*, a 241-foot long, 6,300 horsepower tugboat commissioned in 1993, is the vehicle that enables the public to bring their views and concerns before the MRC and engage in dialogue with its members. The vessel serves dual functions. During the construction season, it is used to meet the towing needs of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. During the traditional high-water and low-water seasons each spring and summer, the members of the MRC board the *Mississippi V* to conduct inspection trips and public meetings at various locations the length of the river.

The tradition of conducting public hearings onboard the *Mississippi* began more than a century ago, and along the way several vessels have carried the proud designation of *Mississippi*: flagship of the MRC.

The steamer *Mississippi I* (1882-1919) was built for the MRC in St. Louis in 1882, and for nearly three decades she carried the members of the MRC on their bi-annual inspection trips of the river from St. Louis to New Orleans. The steamer also carried President Theodore Roosevelt and President Howard Taft on river inspections from Cairo to New Orleans. In 1919, the *Mississippi I* was transferred to the Second MRC District in Memphis, renamed the *Piomingo*, and used extensively as a towboat.

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### 3-3-3/MRC Celebrating

The steamer *Mississippi II* (1920-1926) was originally designated as the steamer *Leota*. Built in 1899 as dredge tender, she was noted for her trim lines and great speed. In 1920 she was selected as new inspection vessel for the MRC. Two years later, the vessel was fitted with new boilers, a new cabin, new machinery, and was renamed the *Mississippi*.

The steamer *Mississippi III* (1927-1961) was the last of the glorious Texas-deck sternwheelers, and helped sustain the colorful traditions and background of the golden age of steamboats on the Mississippi River. Improvements and additions over the years transformed the *Mississippi III* into the most powerful government-owned towboat in the Mississippi Valley. The *Mississippi III* continued in service until April 1961, when she was decommissioned by the Corps of Engineers at Memphis.

The motor vessel *Mississippi IV* (1961-1993) was the first diesel-powered vessel to serve as the MRC inspection boat. She was built with an all steel superstructure, and powered by two 8-cylinder engines, each capable of developing 1,860 horsepower. Unique controllable-reversible propellers greatly improved the motor vessel's maneuverability in treacherous river currents. The *Mississippi IV* served as the MRC inspection vessel until her decommissioning at Memphis in 1993.

For more information on the Mississippi River Commission and its storied history, please visit the following website: <http://www.mvd.usace.army.mil/mrc/index.php>



**Public hearing conducted aboard the motor vessel *Mississippi V* during the Mississippi River Commission's 2004 fall low-water inspection trip, August 16-27.**



Public hearing conducted aboard the steamer *Mississippi III* during the Mississippi River Commission's 1952 spring high-water inspection trip.



Steamer *Mississippi I* (1882-1919).



Motor Vessel *Mississippi V* (1993 – present).