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Contact:

Brooke Magary 314-331-8068
Brooke.E.Magary@usace.army.mil

Let's talk about levees: USACE, Levee District, and City of Wood River partner for community awareness campaign

ST. LOUIS, Mo. – Often times levees are only talked about during crises. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, St. Louis District, the Wood River Drainage and Levee District, and Wood River city officials are changing that with a community awareness campaign all about the Wood River levee systems.

The Wood River Flood Protection Project, located in Wood River, Illinois, is three systems operating in unison – the Upper system, Lower system, and the East/West system. Approximately 20,000 individuals, as well as industry, transportation infrastructure, and 13,700 acres valued at \$1.5 billion within Madison County benefit from the flood risk reduction afforded by these systems. Although the system was constructed in the 1950's, Wood River Drainage and Levee District and USACE have partnered to complete significant improvements over the last 15 years, with continued investment. "Although many of the more complex levee improvements such as cutoff walls have already been completed, we need to maintain forward momentum, so we complete all improvements prior to the next major flood," said Hal Graef, USACE Project manager. "We have several design packages complete and are close to initiating construction. As always, taking actions to reduce risk to life loss is our top priority."

During the flood of 1993, extensive monitoring and flood fighting efforts were critical to maintaining levee integrity. Uncontrolled underseepage (river water that seeps under a levee from the riverside to the landside during a flood) was observed and aged components malfunctioned during this and subsequent flood events. However, in 2019, the levee performed well with far less flood fighting efforts compared to that of 1993, demonstrating that investments in levee improvements have paid off.

"The river was above flood stage for 135 consecutive days in 2019," said Kevin Williams, Executive director of the Wood River Drainage and Levee District. "The areas of concern where underseepage threatened the integrity of the levee in 1993 were mitigated by the investments made by the Levee District and our other non-federal sponsors. Over 100,000 tons of aggregate and rip rap was strategically placed in low lying areas to construct graded filters where sand boils had been noted previously. Nearly 100 new relief wells were also drilled to further control where underseepage occurs," explained Williams. "Through continued investment and a renewed emphasis on efficient operation and maintenance, the Levee District is now better prepared for the next major flood."

The systems, which include approximately 21 miles of levee, have increased reliability and resiliency through USACE and Wood River Drainage and Levee District's partnership on projects that have focused on improvement of deteriorated and aging infrastructure, including the rehabilitation of closure structures and gravity drains, and improvements to the components that manage uncontrolled underseepage.

Though many improvements are complete, ongoing design and construction of additional flood risk reduction features, such as relief wells and pump stations, are a part of the continued plan to improve resiliency of the Wood River levees. With the construction that has been completed, the Wood River levees were able to achieve continued

accreditation in the Federal Emergency Management Agency's National Flood Insurance Program, which requires demonstration that the levees will adequately reduce flood risk for the 100 year flood event, a flood that has a 1% chance of occurring in any given year. The additional improvements will restore the levee system to its authorized level of flood risk reduction, which is approximately a 500-year flood event, having a 0.2% chance of occurring in any given year.

It's important to recognize that while these levee systems reduce flood risk to people, businesses, critical infrastructure, and the environment, they don't eliminate flood risk. Continued investment and attention are critical to ensuring their resiliency for years to come. With many changes and improvements throughout the Wood River levee systems, USACE, the Wood River Drainage and Levee District, and Wood River city officials want you to be informed – know your risk, know your role, and take action to reduce your risk.

"Investing in and strengthening our infrastructure has been important to protect our community," said Wood River Mayor Tom Stalcup. "The upgrades to the Wood River system has made it more resilient and safer for our community, and that is the top priority."

Stalcup's commitment to the safety of people living and working behind the levee is echoed by both Wood River Police Chief Brad Wells and Fire Chief Wade Stahlhut.

"The City of Wood River's partnership with both the Corps of Engineers and the Wood River Drainage and Levee District on this community outreach campaign is so important," says Chief Wells. "It's our mission to keep people safe, and educating and informing our community through this campaign is a great way to do that."

"I want to thank the Corps and the Levee District for all their hard work to improve this system. Their partnership and commitment are essential to the safety of our residents," said Mayor Stalcup.

Watch for more community outreach messages regarding the Wood River levee systems this summer. Detailed information on the Wood River Levee Systems can be found on the National Levee Database at <https://nld.usace.army.mil> or at the Wood River Drainage and Levee District website at www.wrldd.org.