

# SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT ON THE YAZOO BACKWATER PROJECT

*A series of editorials have been printed over a period of many months critical of the Yazoo Backwater Project, a much needed and federally-authorized flood control project. These editorials have culminated in the most recent attack ("Yazoo Pump: Facts clear, it's a waste of money", The Clarion-Ledger, January 22, 2003). Only a few days later, Mississippi Senators Thad Cochran and Trent Lott both went on the Congressional record endorsing the Project; Congressman Bennie Thompson had endorsed the project in a Clarion-Ledger editorial the week before.*

*We believe that it is in the best interest of the citizens of the South Delta for whom the Yazoo Backwater Project will benefit enormously—as well as all Mississippi citizens—for the erroneous information being put out regularly by The Clarion-Ledger to be challenged...and corrected. Lives depend on the truth being known. (All editorial comments below are taken directly from the paper's January, 22 editorial)*

EDITORIAL: "... (which former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt called a "cockamamie" idea)..."

RESPONSE: This comment by Bruce Babbitt is continually trotted out by *The Clarion-Ledger*. We wonder how an Arizona Senator knows more about what's best for the Mississippi South Delta than Mississippi's own Washington delegation. Babbitt is certainly entitled to his own opinion; but he does not live here and, therefore, knows little from where he speaks. Is it "cockamamie" to keep a child safe from the terrors of floodwater? Can *The Clarion-Ledger* not find a better criticism than this?

EDITORIAL: "It's made worse by the sneaky way in which it has now been slipped into a spending package before the U.S. Senate."

RESPONSE: "Sneaky"? The U.S. Congress has funded this project each year since FY 1996 and was endorsed on C-SPAN—national television—by Senators Lott and Cochran in a live session aired on January 23, 2003.

EDITORIAL: "In fact, it won't solve flooding in the South Delta but will only reduce flooding."

RESPONSE: No project is constructed to completely "solve" flooding; only an act of God can do that. The project will, however, solve many of the problems that families who inhabit over 1000 homes in the area face during high water events. The Yazoo Backwater Project will lower the 100-year flood plain by 4 to 4.5 feet.

EDITORIAL: "In fact, it will mostly benefit a relative handful of owners of large tracts of land."

RESPONSE: The key word here is "relative." The vast majority of homeowners and citizens of the South Delta are not wealthy landowners; they are working class citizens, many at or just above the poverty level and most of whom are African-American. This Project is by no means a class warfare issue, though *The Clarion-Ledger* seems to want to paint it as such. Preliminary research by the Levee Board indicates that over 600 landowners in the 100-year flood plain in Yazoo County alone will benefit from the Project. This number does not include the five other counties impacted by the 100-year flood.

EDITORIAL: "But what's often overlooked is that some have lived with the flooding there since the 1800's. Others moved there for the low land cost."

RESPONSE: Flooding in this area is affected by water from 41% of the continental United States. Development from other parts of the country in the Mississippi River drainage basin has increased flooding substantially since the 1800's. The South Delta area is now subject to flooding like never before. Moreover, citizens who moved to the South Delta after Congressional authorization of the Project in 1941 assumed they would have that protection of their lives and property in place. They are still waiting.

EDITORIAL: "Should the U.S. Government—us taxpayers—bail them out?"

RESPONSE: Drainage from all or part of 31 states in the U.S., from New York to Montana, comes down the Mississippi River directly impacting the South Delta. Taxpayer-funded projects have been put in place for much less. In 1979, during the great Jackson flood, *The Clarion-Ledger* itself had 20 pumps flown into the downtown area (SOURCE: *The Great Flood*, published by *The Clarion-Ledger/Jackson Daily News*, 1979, Library of Congress #79-88610). If it's good enough for *The Clarion-Ledger*, isn't it good enough for over 1,000 homeowners and their families in the South Delta?

EDITORIAL: "...figures by Virginia Tech economists Leonard Schabman and Laura Zepp, suggest that it would cost less than the pump to simply, in effect, hand them [South Delta residents] the money."

RESPONSE: Leonard Schabman was on the payroll of the EPA to conduct a study when the figures in question were released, so his objectivity should be called into question. In addition, Schabman and Zepp *never* stated in their study—the Schabman Report—that money should be handed to area residents in lieu of building the Pump. Besides, all the money in the world could be handed out and such a payout would not negate the fact that roads, schools and churches would still be flooded.

EDITORIAL: "...it is becoming standard procedure to relocate residents rather than for taxpayers to pay repeatedly to repair damages or build costly water control projects."

RESPONSE: Has *The Clarion-Ledger* considered relocating since the '79 Flood? Why should South Delta citizens be relocated from homes they have lived in for generations? Where would they go? What would they do? These people simply want to see what has been authorized by Congress since 1941—the Yazoo Backwater Project—to be put in place. Ask yourself: Would *you* want to leave your lifetime home?

EDITORIAL: "It is a waste of taxpayer money that could be better spent on relocating residents, building infrastructure, providing job training and economic incentives for industry to locate."

RESPONSE: You cannot build infrastructure or locate industries into an area that is continually subject to the magnitude of flooding seen in the South Delta. Conversely, in the case of the Pump, build it and industries and businesses will come. The area economy cannot thrive without flood control.

EDITORIAL: "Why aren't our U.S. senators and congressmen taking this approach to better the region rather than trying to funnel hundreds of millions of dollars to a few large landowners and those with political clout in the Delta?"

RESPONSE: Beneficiaries of the Project will be the hardworking, decent South Delta citizens. Additionally, Congressman Bennie Thompson and Senators Thad Cochran and Trent Lott will reap no political benefits from the Project except the satisfaction of finally delivering on a federal promise made long ago to a much-neglected part of this state.

**THE CLARION-LEDGER HAS CONSISTENTLY SUPPORTED FEDERALLY FUNDED FLOOD CONTROL PROJECTS FOR THE JACKSON METRO AREA. WHEN WILL THEY SUPPORT FLOOD CONTROL FOR THE DELTA?**



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