



News Release

**U.S. Army Corps
of Engineers
St. Paul District**

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Public Affairs

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Mississippi Headwaters reservoir operations system long-term planning underway

SAINT PAUL, MINN. – The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, St. Paul District, and the U.S. Forest Service hope to change for the better the way the federal reservoir dams in the Headwaters of the Upper Mississippi River are operated.

This spring, the Corps and the Forest Service began a long-range planning process called the Headwaters Reservoir Operations Plan Evaluation, or ROPE study, to bring together Corps and non-Corps dam operators, interested federal agencies and other stakeholders in the region. The study group members will look at flood control issues, environmental concerns, tribal interests, recreational use of the lakes and rivers, navigational and hydropower concerns and more and will involve an extensive public and interagency involvement program to develop a new operating plan for the region's reservoir system.

The ROPE study is expected to last four years and cost around \$2.8 million. It will be the first time the public and other government agencies will be heavily involved with the Corps in the development of new Headwaters reservoir operating plans, as well as the first time all of the reservoirs are being looked at in a system-wide approach. In addition, it will be the first time the operating plan for this region has been updated since the 1950s.

St. Paul District currently operates six federal dams in the Headwaters area, including Leech, Winnibigoshish, Big Sandy, Pine (White Fish chain), Pokegama and Gull. The Corps built these dams in the late 1800s and early 1900s to manage water flows on the Mississippi River for navigation and milling in the Twin Cities and to aid in steamboat navigation and lumber transportation. But with the completion of the nine-foot navigation project on the Mississippi River in the 1930s, the headwaters dams now serve mainly to fulfill tribal trust requirements, control flooding and to maintain water levels for recreational use and fish and wildlife habitat.

The Forest Service regulates Knutson Dam on Cass. The Corps transferred the dam, which is located in the Chippewa National Forest, to this agency in 1928.

In addition to the federal Headwaters dams, a number of private dams are also operated to regulate lakes in the Mississippi Headwaters, including the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources on Mud and Goose, Ottortail Power on Bemidji and Minnesota Power on the Prairie River chain.

The Corps and Forest Service will work in close coordination with these non-Corps operators, as well as with the Leech Lake Band and Mille Lacs Lake Band of the Ojibway, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, the Mississippi Headwaters Board and lake property groups at each of the reservoirs and environmental groups in completing this study. These involvements will be accomplished through a variety of newly formed agency task forces and through local volunteers participating in lake groups.

Corps project manager Ed McNally, said it was these non-Corps dam operators and the Mississippi Headwaters Board who first approached the Corps six years ago to ask the Corps to take the lead in developing a system-wide operating plan for water control. Their request resulted in a series of public meetings three years ago and then involvement by Rep. James Oberstar-D, Minn.

The congressional interest resulted in the Corps conducting a reconnaissance study in 2000 that looked at the federal interest in water management from Lake Itasca to Lock and Dam 2 on the Mississippi River. This report allowed the Corps to identify problems and opportunities and determine the likelihood of a federal interest in more detailed feasibility studies. This study recommended a basin-wide watershed feasibility study for the Headwaters, as well as three spin-off smaller planning feasibility studies focusing in the Twin Cities area, which are currently ongoing.

The ROPE study began with a series of public and interagency workshops. For most of 2002, the primary focus of the study was to begin collecting pertinent data and to mobilize a number of citizen lake groups and technical task forces to provide local perspective and scientific inputs to the study.

In 2003, the inventory phase of the ROPE study is scheduled for completion. In addition, formal scoping for the Environmental Impact Statement, evaluation and comparison of alternative plans will be done, and preparation of an initial screening report will be initiated. The screening of alternatives will involve developing a detailed evaluation matrix for screening operational alternatives and obtaining matrix inputs from the task forces and lake groups. Then, in 2004, McNally said he expects the draft and final reports to be prepared and fully coordinated with the public, stakeholders, government agencies and tribes.

“When we’re done with this ROPE study, we are hopeful that implemental changes can be recommended and be understood and supported,” said McNally. “To accomplish this, we will be continuously involving the tribes and local and state government inputs into the plan formulation, so they all can contribute to the planning and have a sense of ownership in the study recommendations.”

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, St. Paul District, serves the American public in the areas of environmental enhancement, navigation, flood damage reduction, wetlands regulation, recreation sites and disaster response. It contributes around \$142 million to the five-state district economy. The more than 750 employees work at more than 40 sites in five upper-Midwest states. For more information, see www.mvp.usace.army.mil.