

Exclusive: One Lake Project could flood parts of South Jackson.

Residents there had no idea

As a controversial dam on the Pearl River proposes deflecting water from wealthier areas into poorer neighborhoods, residents ask themselves -- stay and get flooded out or leave with no place to go?

8/7/2024, Mississippi Clarion Ledger, By [Chaya Tong](#)

Sandbags line the edges of Juanita Day's home on a quiet road in South Jackson. Stacked upon each other against the house's frame, they cover the perimeter of the structure.

Another stack of more than 80 bags stands in front of a car shelter, slightly to the side of the house. All of the sandbags are handmade by 80-year-old Day and her husband, David Christopher. The last time they had to make them, it took the two and their grandson days to bag enough for the whole property.

Day sits on her front stoop in a rocking chair, the purple flowers she's planted in her front yard peeking through her porch rails. She and Christopher are just one year away from paying off the house. She looks out across the grass of her front yard and the property she has lived on for the last 30 years, contemplating what floods — ones bigger than the many she has already seen — would mean.

"I'm deathly afraid of water," she said. "I do not swim."

Day and her neighbors in South Jackson, as well as people in the communities of Richland and Byram, could be set up for more flooding as developers decide whether and how to dredge and dam the Pearl River.

Though not known to many of the residents who would receive downstream induced flooding from the potential dam, their neighborhoods are marked with purple squares on potential development maps, part of 38,000 acres indicated for induced floods where water pushed away from wealthier areas of the Jackson metro would instead tear its way through economically disadvantaged communities.

The Clarion Ledger canvassed all three potentially affected neighborhoods marked in the development plans for induced flooding. The neighborhoods cross borders from South Jackson to Byram and into Richland.

Of the 55 residents spoken to, only two, who had gotten their information through the nonprofit, Pearl Riverkeeper, had heard about the dam, about potential flooding in their neighborhood or about recent updates on the One Lake Project.



The dam proposal is just the latest in the One Lake Project, a controversial initiative to curb Pearl River flooding in Jackson by creating a lake and reservoir downstream from the Ross Barnett Reservoir. The Project will be mainly funded by federal grants and local taxes and constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, but the project is locally sponsored by The Rankin-Hinds Pearl River Flood and Drainage Control District, which hails the project's potential to bring economic opportunity, and open up new real estate and recreational venues to the area along the river.

After decades of debate, One Lake is poised to become a reality. The Corps released its most recent iteration of the plan, the Draft Environmental Impact Statement, on June 7, with four alternatives.

While the Corps did not state its chosen plan yet and will not officially choose until sometime after this past week, it labelled Alternative D as the "National Economic Development Plan," or the plan that maximizes net economic benefit.

Alternative D would include dredging and damming the Pearl River, leading to the induced flooding that the Corps, in its DEIS, said would impact more than 200 structures.

In its main report, the Corps identified approximately 52 structures that would flood so severely — with first floor flooding of 5 inches or more — that it would offer owners voluntary buyouts, elevation or floodproofing. The Corps will make a final decision on which alternative to use in December.

But the project hasn't been all smooth sailing. In July, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife ruling to protect the Pearl River Map Turtle under the Endangered Species Act put a potential delay in place for One Lake. The Pearl River Map Turtle is a freshwater turtle indigenous to the Pearl River. The dam could still move forward, but the Corps would have to consult U.S. Fish and Wildlife before starting construction on the river.

To stay or to go? South Jackson neighborhood debates

For Day, an extra 5 inches of water on top of the flooding she already gets, would make her property uninhabitable. The handmade sandbags, barely sufficient to hold back the deluge as is, would be unable to withstand it.

For years, Day said, she has worked hard to make her house payments, never missed one, never been late.

“For them people to intentionally flood this property,” she said, her eyes brimming with tears, “that’s not right. And we might not be rich people, but we matter.”

Day doesn’t know what she would do if induced flooding came to her house, maybe buy a mobile home or move to Raymond or Dallas with their children.

“We have been here for so long,” she said.

Day’s street is mostly older folks, people who, like Day, have lived in the neighborhood for years.

The lady across the street, Day said, pointing at a blue house with a cast stone fountain, her husband had a heart attack and died, so she lives alone.

The woman in another house, gray with a white door, across the road from Day, “She is by herself,” Day said.

“This man over here has Parkinson’s,” Day said, motioning down the road to another house. “He has a caregiver that stays over there with him.”



The house next door to Day and Christopher, home of Angela Garner, is surrounded by a red brick wall, another form of makeshift flood protection. The wall was constructed after the 1979 “Easter floods” that put most of Jackson, even the Coliseum, under water.

“Her husband,” Garner said, nodding at the blue house across the street, “came in [on a boat] and just kind of salvaged the people that were living here.”

The wall hasn’t done much in recent years. Like Day, Garner has water to her door when it rains.

Garner said she would stay in her home, even if the floods increase and even if she is one of the homes to which developers offer a buyout. After everything she has put into the house, it just wouldn’t be worth it.

“Will I be the only one here on the street? I don’t know,” she said, sitting on the brick wall looking across the street at her neighbors. “I mean, I work so hard.”

Transparency troubles

The Corps held two in-person meetings in Jackson in July and one virtual public meeting in June about the alternatives. There is a 60-day public comment period that was open until Aug. 6. Garner and a neighbor, advised about the proposed dam by Pearl Riverkeeper, attended one of the public meetings.

One of the slides at the meeting mentioned the “structural flooding inducements” in economically disadvantaged areas that would occur in neighborhoods like Garner’s, which the Corps refers to as “environmental justice (EJ) areas of concern.”

“We want to make sure everyone’s involved and make sure we aren’t targeting cheap land to build the project,” said Brandon Davis, environmental planning chief for the Corps, at the July 10 in-person public meeting.

“We’re making sure everyone’s involved, everyone’s included.”

Tom Shaw, project management chief for the Corps, echoed Davis’ sentiments in an interview with the Clarion Ledger. He said that the Corps is “working with those EJ communities that are identified in the study area trying to get some feedback.” He said that there would be more meetings in the impacted communities in the next few months if Alternative D is approved.

In the July 10 public meeting, David said there would be two to three meetings in the coming months to give “environmental justice” communities the opportunity to ask more questions and “understand about the project and how it’s going to benefit them.”

Notably, those meetings would take place after the public comment period is over.



The specific impacts of the flooding and proposed buyouts and floodproofing, however, were not spelled out on the slides, leaving even those who attended the meetings largely in the dark about the consequences of adopting Alternative D.

Though present in the June 27 virtual meeting, a slide titled “areas of consideration for downstream impacts” was missing in the July public meetings. Shaw said the Corps removed the slide, the only part of the presentation with a map illustrating geographic areas in Jackson that would receive downstream induced flooding, to eliminate duplication, shorten the slideshow and “provide additional clarification.” The Corps, he said, replaced the slide “areas of consideration for downstream impacts” with a slide showing “potential influence area” across county lines all the way to Lawrence, Mississippi.

Although induced flooding from the dam would cover an area of 38,000 acres containing around 220 structures, the Corps estimates that only 52 structures would be impacted enough to receive offers like elevation plans for putting homes on stilts or floodproofing. It was unable to provide the addresses of any of those properties because further study of the floodplain is needed to narrow down specific points.

Keith W. Turner, attorney for The Rankin-Hinds Pearl River Flood and Drainage Control District, said the area marked for induced flooding on the map is an estimate and “worst case scenario,” adding that the board thinks the Corps overestimates negative impact.

Of the 55 residents the Clarion Ledger spoke with in Byram, South Jackson and Richland, none had heard from developers, or anyone involved with the One Lake Project and only two, Garner and her neighbor, notified by Pearl Riverkeeper, had heard about the induced flooding at all.

“The outreach to the community that is actually getting flooded that could have induced flooding currently hasn't happened at all,” said Abby Braman, executive director of Pearl Riverkeeper, which opposes Alternative D. “If we don't have a good knowledge of what's going on, the negative and the positive effects of the project, then there's no way for us to make an educated decision about whether the project is appropriate or not.”

'We'd be destitute': Richland residents wonder where they will go

The DEIS main report states that Alternative D “may cause high, adverse disproportionate impacts to low-income residents who cannot afford the costs associated with elevation” and one option “may be available which involves offering voluntary buyouts to homeowners unable to participate in the elevation program due to high financial burdens.”

Wanda St. Germain Bischof, who lives in a trailer park neighborhood in Richland marked on the flood map, already gets flooding every time it rains. She has video cameras and a large flashlight trained on the gully by her property so she can predict how bad it will overflow. With water regularly up to the deck on her trailer home, Bischof said 5 more inches of water would flood out the inside.

During a flood last year, she watched her neighbor's car get totaled in his driveway from the water. Since then, she has moved all of her cars to the top of the road where elevation is higher every time it rains.

While the lot she lives on may be worth \$19,000, the trailer is over 40 years old.

“They're not going to give us nothing for that,” she said.

A potential buyout for her trailer and property from developers, she added, would not cover new land, utilities and a house.

“Where are we gonna go?” she said. “We'd be destitute. This is everything.”

Bischof, who works cleaning homes for the elderly and is semi-retired, spent all of her retirement money on the trailer, paying it off and fixing it up so she could die in it. She and her husband have lived in the trailer for the past 35 years and raised their two kids from birth in it.

“It may be a beat up trailer, but it's my home and it's our home,” she said.



A couple of streets over from Bischof, Dot Roberson also gets flash flooding in her yard. One time, it was so bad that she had to wade through her yard to get to her car, the water splashing halfway up her legs.

Roberson said buying flood insurance wouldn't be an option for her and a lot of her neighbors. Her insurance company quoted her around \$1,500 a year for flood insurance.

"I can't afford that," she said. "The biggest portion of people here are like me. I'm a widow. I'm 77 years old, retired, living off of Social Security, alone."

Walking around her front yard, she points out two large sinkholes from the last time it rained.

"They should talk to the people that it's going to impact," she said. "Think about what it's going to do to them."

Most of the flood protection the One Lake Project seeks to put in place would go to wealthier areas of Jackson, Braman said, and worse, the economic development plan and recreational area around the river, one of the project's biggest benefits, would serve the same well-to-do areas.



The potential price of upstream affluence and flood mitigation would be paid downstream by some of Jackson metro's poorest neighborhoods, affecting people such as Day or Garner, Bischof or Roberson.

"It would really impact us very badly if they do this," Roberson said, pausing to find the right words. "I mean they'd just about wash us out."