

# TOWER TIMES

June/July 2025

TEAMING UP FOR  
CRITICAL LEVEE REPAIRS



US Army Corps  
of Engineers®  
Rock Island District



## Mission

The Rock Island District's mission is to deliver vital engineering and water resource solutions in collaboration with our partners to secure our Nation, reduce disaster risk and enhance quality of life, providing value to the region and Nation.

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A premier public service, engineering organization of trusted, talented professionals delivering innovative and sustainable solutions to the region and Nation.

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Col. Aaron M. Williams

**Deputy Commander**  
Maj. Matthew Fletcher

**Chief, Corporate Communications**  
Allen Marshall

**Editor**  
Jordan Raiff

**Editorial Contributors**  
Frances Candelaria  
Jim Finn  
Sam Heilig

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It is published bimonthly by the Corporate Communications Office, Rock Island District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Articles or photographic submissions are welcome and should be submitted by the 15th of each month preceding publication. Circulation 1,000.



**US Army Corps of Engineers**  
Rock Island District  
Clock Tower Building  
P.O. Box 2004  
Rock Island, IL 61204-2004  
Email: cemvr-cc@usace.army.mil  
Phone: (309) 794-4200

# TOWER TIMES

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### *On the Cover*

A crane from the Mississippi River project places rock along the bottom of the river as part of a levee rehabilitation effort. The project was a collaborative effort between Operations Division and Emergency Management.

*Photo by Frances Candelaria*

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## Entering the Home Stretch: Teamwork and Commitment Persists

Rock Island Team,  
We are more than halfway through the calendar year, and our district continues to excel. As we enter the fourth quarter of the fiscal year, I am excited about the continued progress on our missions.

Despite the numerous challenges we have faced in recent months, I remain impressed by the steadfast dedication and resilience of our workforce. The teamwork and commitment demonstrated by our team is commendable.

We have made significant progress on several programs and projects despite these challenges and our team continues to actively support emergency response needs across the Nation.

The results of the President's fiscal year 2026 budget were recently released, and our district will receive funds to continue advancing our programs and projects. I look forward to visiting Brandon Road in the coming weeks as we host the interim Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works.

I appreciate the recent support for our Town Hall and value the opportunity to engage with each of you. I am committed to providing transparency and advocating for our workforce.

I look forward to serving with each of you and visiting sites, workspaces, and projects in the coming months. As always, I am appreciative of your dedication and commitment to each other and the District.

Continuing Building Strong and Essayons!

Appreciate you,



Col. Aaron M. Williams  
Rock Island District Commander  
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers



Col. Aaron M. Williams  
District Commander

The President's fiscal year 2026 budget (PBUD) was released May 30 – President Trump's first budget since taking office, and an important clue to understanding his administration's priorities. The budget includes \$6.7 billion for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers – close to the amount in last year's PBUD – demonstrating the administration's broad support for our work even in the current cost-cutting environment.

Two items in the PBUD are positive signs for our district's overall program. The first is \$52 million identified for Upper Mississippi River Restoration. Many of you are aware of the program reduction we experienced under the full-year continuing resolution (CR) this fiscal year. Seeing our PBUD numbers nearly match what we were provided in fiscal year 2024 is encouraging. The second item is \$28 million identified for the Brandon Road Interbasin Project (BRIP). This follows a recent presidential memorandum in support of the project. BRIP has funds on-hand to complete the first increment of construction but will need additional funds to complete the overall project. Support from both Congress and the President will be vital to securing funds for BRIP in the future.

If history is any guide, we are likely to begin fiscal year 2026 under a CR, maintaining USACE funding at fiscal year 2024 levels. While this approach provides stability in the short term, it also presents challenges in aligning resources with evolving priorities but I have no doubt the Rock Island District team will continue to rise to the occasion!

*Brad C. Houzenga*  
Brad C. Houzenga, P.E., S.E.  
Deputy District Engineer  
Programs and Project Management

# UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC LAW 84-99 REHABILITATION PROGRAM

By Sam Heilig, Public Affairs Specialist

**F**ollowing devastating floods and coastal storms in the mid-20th century, Congress passed the Flood Control and Coastal Emergency Act, also known as Public Law 84-99 (enacted Aug. 18, 1960). This law authorizes the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to help communities prepare for and respond to floods and coastal storms. This includes disaster preparedness, emergency operations, rehabilitation, restoration, advanced measures, drought assistance, and even emergency water assistance in cases of contamination.

“PL 84-99 is the foundation of our emergency response efforts,” said Sarah Jones, Chief of Emergency Management at the USACE Rock Island District. “It allows us to provide both technical expertise and direct assistance, supplementing the work already being done by Tribal, state and local authorities.”

Under the authority of PL 84-99, an eligible Flood Risk Management System (FRMS) – such as a local levee district or a drainage authority – may receive rehabilitation assistance if it is damaged during a flood event. All systems considered eligible for PL 84-99 rehabilitation assistance must be active in the Rehabilitation and Inspection Program before the flood event occurs.

If the FRMS was originally constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and later turned over to a levee sponsor for operation and maintenance, it is considered a federal system. Federal systems may be eligible for full restoration to pre-disaster

condition at 100 percent federal cost for design and construction. In contrast, non-federal systems – those not constructed by USACE – are required to cost share 20 percent of the construction costs. Non-federal systems may request entry into the program through an Initial Eligibility Inspection.

USACE determines if a levee remains eligible for PL 84-99 rehabilitation assistance through recurring levee inspections. These inspections use a standard checklist to identify specific items to be fixed during routine, preventative maintenance and provide an opportunity for proactive collaboration prior to flood events.

A subset of the checklist items which are deemed critical to the performance of a FRMS during high water must be considered in at least Minimally Acceptable condition for continued eligibility. Levee inspection reports performed by USACE are stored online in the National Levee Database (<https://levees.sec.usace.army.mil/>). The National Levee Database captures all known levee systems nationwide, allowing the public, agencies, and decision makers to assess risk, focus priorities, support preparedness and promote collaboration.

In addition to the cost benefits of the program, USACE also provides a multi-disciplined team of engineers, scientists, and technical experts to design eligible projects utilizing over 100 years of institutional expertise constructing similar projects in the same watershed.

While the Rehabilitation Program may not




**Before and after photos of levee repair work completed at the Bay Island Levee and Drainage District in Mercer County, Illinois. Photos courtesy of Emergency Management.**

construct any betterments to an FRMS, the repairs are able to incorporate resiliency measures and design improvements based on current engineering principles. For example, armoring of a levee slope with a specific grouping of different sized rocks called riprap could be added where repetitive erosion occurs due to currents, waves or where new erosion occurs due to the loss of a pre-existing tree line.

On the land or dry side of a levee, sand may be placed in a long, wide layer called a berm to address areas with high volumes of water traveling through or

beneath the levee, referred to as seepage.

According to PL 84-99, the Rehabilitation Program provides flood mitigation to the homes, businesses, and infrastructure that reside in an area behind a levee by promoting emergency response planning, sound FRMS maintenance practices, and continued partnerships. The funding and expertise required for the restoration of flood risk management systems after floods and coastal storms emphasizes the vital role this law plays in keeping communities safe and resilient. 

## TEAMING UP FOR CRITICAL LEVEE REPAIRS

By Frances Candelaria, Public Affairs Specialist

**W**hen different sections within the District collaborate, they can effectively address intricate and multifaceted challenges like flood risk mitigation. Recently, Operations Division teamed up with Emergency Management by supporting a PL 84-99 levee repair project that involved placing rip-rap along a stretch of the Mississippi River near Lock and Dam 17 where damage had occurred.

Contracts are often used for levee repairs. However, the repairs needed for this project were outside the scope of work for most contractors.


“We typically engage OD when there’s an urgent need—such as a repair that can’t wait without increasing flood risk—or when we need a cost-effective solution within a limited timeline,” said Sarah Jones, chief of Emergency Management at the Rock Island District. “OD understands the Emergency Management mission and the importance it plays in reducing flood risks for local communities. Their responsiveness and dedication truly make a difference.”

The rip-rap placed by the Operations crew was RR5, a type of rock with a max weight of 440 pounds per rock which can help protect against water erosion and stabilize soil.

Since the start of the project, “we’ve placed 70,000 tons of rip-rap total,” explained Matt Thurman, Mississippi River Project Maintenance Chief. “We are averaging 1,500 tons per day.”

The joint effort between Operations Division and Emergency Management highlights the strength found in inter-district coordination when addressing critical repairs such as replacing rip-rap. This showcases the high efficiency of Emergency Management as well as Operations Division’s dedicated performance.

“Placing rip-rap under water with no visibility is a very difficult task,” Thurman said. “The crane operators have done an outstanding job with this.”

The rip-rap replacement is just one of many examples of how Operations Division’s highly trained team supports the diverse USACE Rock Island District missions. 



An excavator and loader move large rocks to a barge for transport to the Bay Island levee repair site near Lock and Dam 17 on the Mississippi River. Photo by Frances Candelaria

# DEPLOYMENT SPOTLIGHT: Third Time's a Mission: Metz Steps Up for Southern California Wildfire Response

By Jordan Raiff, Public Affairs Specialist

Volunteering for a deployment is rarely a simple decision the first time. Doing so multiple times can be even more complex. Yet for Jerod Metz, LaGrange Lock and Dam operator and shift leader, it's become easier each time.

"Back at LaGrange, it's mundane — locking boats in and out. You get into a routine," Metz said. "Out here, you get to meet property owners, hear their stories and work with different crews each day. It's a very rewarding job."

It's not just the change of scenery or escape from the monotony of lock and dam work that draws people like Metz. The emphasis on safety and training is a major factor in his decision to volunteer.

"Safety is the No. 1 priority out here. We make sure we're on the same page when it comes to safety above all else," Metz said. "The training has been in-depth, and they make sure you're ready before going into the field. This has been some of the best training I've received so far."

Coming together from a variety of backgrounds can seem daunting at first, but Metz said he's grateful for the collaborative atmosphere.

"Everyone out here is eager to work. They know what they're doing, and they're happy to be helping the survivors of these fires," he said.


Based in the Eaton Fire Zone, Metz spent most of his time helping the people of Altadena. Although the region has endured Santa Ana winds and wildfires for generations, many residents said they had never experienced anything like this event.

That made the clearing phase of recovery more difficult, as Metz and his team couldn't simply rush through the properties.

"People attach themselves to almost anything still intact. There have been a lot of flowerpots and vases that survived unscathed," he said. "We try to accommodate survivors' requests as best we can. If there's no ash debris or soot on them, we try to get them into a safe spot. Sometimes you come across

things you don't expect to find. It's cool to see the history underneath the ground."

For those considering their first deployment, Metz offers encouragement.

"You'll be nervous to get out there and try something you haven't done before. This is my third deployment — and my first fire and debris mission. I was nervous at first, too," Metz said. "I encourage anyone who wants to help people devastated by wildfires or hurricanes to give it a shot. You get great training when you arrive, and then you'll be teamed up with someone who's been on site for a while." 



**While deployed in response to the Southern California Wildfires, Jerod Metz, a LaGrange, Illinois, Lock and Dam operator, puts his experience to work with an arborist as they confer on the best way to clear a property. Photos by Jordan Raiff**

# RED ROCK DAM UNDERGOING CRITICAL GATE REHABILITATION

By Sam Heilig, Public Affairs Specialist



**U**SACE Rock Island District's Red Rock Dam, near Knoxville, Iowa, is undergoing significant rehabilitation of its Tainter and sluice gates to ensure the long-term reliability of the structure. The project, which began in October 2022, is expected to be completed this fall.

Red Rock Dam plays a crucial role in flood control for the Des Moines River Valley, as well as providing recreational opportunities and a reliable water supply for the region. Maintaining its operational capacity is a key component of that effort.

The work includes repairs to three of the dam's five large Tainter gates. Crews are removing rust and corrosion, repairing welds, and applying a new coat of paint. All five Tainter gates are receiving new wire ropes – essential for raising and lowering the gates – as part of a scheduled 15-year replacement cycle. Side seals and limit switches on all five gates are also being replaced.

"This work is essential to maintaining the integrity and functionality of Red Rock Dam," said Lake Manager Hugh Howe. "Rust and corrosion had begun to affect the Tainter gates, wire ropes and related components, necessitating these repairs. Proactive maintenance like this extends the lifespan of the dam and prevents more costly repairs down the road."

Alongside the Tainter gate work, two of the dam's 14 smaller sluice gates are also being rehabilitated. These 5-foot-by-9-foot gates control water flow through Red Rock Dam, with a combined capacity of up to 38,000 cubic feet per second.

The project focuses on replacing worn components on the gates, including gate leaf wearable parts, bonnet cover seals, and chatter strips – elements critical for a watertight seal. This is the first time many of these components have been replaced on the sluice gates since the dam's construction.


Howe said accessing the gates for repairs hasn't been easy. A temporary bulkhead was installed upstream to isolate the Tainter gates from the lake, creating a dry workspace.

"Increased lake levels and a need to maintain a conservation pool over time have necessitated the bulkhead, which wasn't part of the dam's original design," said Howe.

Workers then used swing stages and scaffolding to reach all areas of the gates. Sluice gate repairs required a different approach: being disassembled inside the dam's control structure and hoisted to the roadway via a narrow hatch, requiring temporary full road closures.

"We understand that the road closures have caused some inconvenience, but they are necessary to safely complete this important work," Howe explained. "We've worked to minimize disruptions and appreciate the public's patience."

It's the first time many of the sluice gate's wearable features have been replaced, and the Tainter gates haven't been repainted since the 1990s.

"The rehabilitation of Red Rock Dam's gates is a significant investment in the future of this vital infrastructure, ensuring its continued ability to provide flood control, recreation and water supply benefits to the region," Howe said. 

# LOCK AND DAM 22 LAUNCHES FISH LADDER TO IMPROVE MIGRATION PATHWAYS

By Jordan Raiff, Public Affairs Specialist

As the Mississippi River winds from Minnesota to the Gulf of America, it undergoes significant transformations. Boulders, sediment, and changing currents made the river challenging to navigate for early mariners. Thanks to the 29 locks and dams between Minnesota and Missouri, the most treacherous sections of the river are now far more navigable for boats of all kinds.

But for fish, things have become a bit more complicated.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Navigation and Ecosystem Sustainability Program (NESP) aims to integrate navigation improvements and ecosystem restoration efforts to enhance the river system and its many uses. The Lock and Dam 22 Fish Passage Improvement Project is one of the many projects supporting this cause.

According to Project Manager, Alaina Pfenning-Butterworth, the objective of this project is to restore upstream connectivity for a wide range of migratory warmwater fish species through the construction of a fish passage structure. The project will increase access to upstream habitats and improve the size and

distribution of native migratory fish populations.

"By restoring these populations, NESP furthers its commitment to improving fish habitats in the Upper Mississippi River, starting with LD22," said Pfenning-Butterworth.

Tara Taets, USACE technical lead, emphasized that this is no small project.

"The ladder extends 600 feet off the spillway," she said. "It's about 200 feet wide, and the entire ladder has a C-shaped curve. The entrance was very important because if it was in the wrong place, fish might not be able to find it. Multiple studies on our native fish species and their movement were incorporated into the models. We found that fish would congregate just to the side of where the water was most turbulent."

Located just south of Hannibal, Missouri, Lock and Dam 22 is well known to boaters and tourists. Across the river on the Illinois side where the spillway is normally accessible to the public, the project staging area sits just outside Park-N-Fish Recreation Area, which has been temporarily closed to the public during construction.



From the edge of the Fish and Park's spillway at Locks and Dam 22, project managers and USACE officials inspect the initial cofferbox installations for the latest NESP project. Photos by Jordan Raiff

According to Ty Jones, a contracting officer representative for the project, “Sturgeon and other fish species migrate from north to south. They need moving water to do so, but our locks and dams have disrupted that process. The water flowing out of the dam differs from the constant inflow and outflow of water at the lock, which rises and falls as water traffic moves. Fish don’t always like that and don’t always travel that way. They would get stuck.”

Jones elaborated, “This project allows fish to bypass the dam. It’s the first of its kind on the Mississippi. Similar projects have been successful out west. The design uses flowing water creatively, flowing through rocks to create divots, like the dimples on a golf ball, known as pools. In each pool, areas of calm water allow fish to rest before continuing their climb. It takes a lot of energy to move from one area to another.”

Jones also noted that this design also creates a pattern that can help deter the spread of invasive carp, which is a concern for USACE and other waterway experts trying to prevent the species from reaching the Great Lakes.

“The pattern of the weir stones was designed similar to an old water navigation chart or sine wave,” Jones said. “Between each rock, there are gaps of different sizes. Some gaps are too small for fish to pass through, while others are too big, forcing them to find an alternative path. It won’t solve the issue entirely, but it will serve as a deterrent.”

Taets emphasized that the fish passage will significantly benefit fish migration in a healthier way.

“The big picture is that we want to give our native fish a fighting chance to migrate as they originally did. Before dams, the river was open with no barriers. A fish ladder gives them a chance to move through a series of pools to rest and riffles where they can burst through rushing water. It forms a stair-step design for them to get over the spillway.”

While construction began in September 2024, initial planning for the project dates back to the early 2000s, according to Jones. This has led to the design and current construction of the fish ladder, one of four Congress approved to be installed on the Mississippi River.


Taets is optimistic about the project’s long-term benefits.

“We intend to increase native fish populations. They’ll have better opportunities for spawning, which will benefit local fishermen in the long run. Although the construction site will limit fishing, we expect the fish populations to thrive once the ladder is operational.”

In a sort of trickle-down effect, Taets said, “We

don’t want all the fish that make it upstream to be caught and consumed. We want them to repopulate and continue their natural cycles. Ideally, this will first boost fish populations and then benefit local communities.”

Both Jones and Taets share a deep passion for the project. Jones’ grandfather worked on the initial planning, and Jones himself helped with some of the design work during college. Taets is impressed with the project’s longevity and academic rigor.

“They’ve been planning this for over 20 years,” she said. “Seeing it come to fruition is incredible. Many smart people have done remarkable research and modeling to support the fish and the Mississippi River system. I’ve been fortunate to work with such talented individuals. Seeing the payoff has been incredibly rewarding, especially after so many years where it wasn’t the core focus.” 



**Chunks of debris and sediment are removed from the river bottom to make room for cofferbox construction.**

*Photo by Jordan Raiff*



**A member of the construction crew highlights a notch workers cut into the sheet steel for ease of installation without needing custom made steel. These sheets are being installed to create a cofferbox along the spillway. Once pumped out, workers will be able to work in the cofferbox to construct the fish ladder.**

*Photo by Jordan Raiff*

# USACE ROCK ISLAND SUPPORTS RIVER OUTREACH

By Frances Candelaria, Public Affairs Specialist

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Rock Island District occasionally teams up with River Action, a nonprofit based in the Quad Cities, to offer guided tours aboard the Channel Cat Water Taxi on the Mississippi River.

These guided tours, called Channel Cat Talks, give the public an inside look at USACE history and ongoing work on the river, from maintaining navigation channels to supporting habitat restoration.

Anthony Heddlesten, design branch chief for the Rock Island District, has served as the USACE guest speaker on these tours for more than 10 years. He enjoys educating and interacting with audiences of all ages who come along for the ride.

Recently, Heddlesten led a tour for a group of children and their caretakers, introducing them to the USACE role on the Mississippi River. Topics included the district's history, navigation safety, and efforts to protect fish and wildlife habitats. Attendees had the chance to ask questions, view historic photos, and see the river from a new perspective.


"Any day, even for just a couple of hours, on the Mississippi is a wonderful day," Heddlesten said.

"As a self-avowed history geek, I've taken the time each year to find out at least a few new facts about the Rock Island District, the river, the lock and dam, or the Quad Cities to add into the tour."



**Volunteer, Anthony Heddlesten, Design Branch Chief at the USACE Rock Island District, leads a guided tour on the Channel Cat Water Taxi as two young riders listen intently while they learn about the Mississippi River.** *Photo by Frances Candelaria*

River Action has worked for years to connect people with the Mississippi River — improving access, protecting the environment and encouraging public interest in the waterway that runs through local communities.

This ongoing collaboration is a strong example of how outreach and partnerships can help the public better understand the vital work being done behind the scenes. 

## SOME FUN FACTS FROM HEDDLESTEN'S TOUR:

- THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER IS APPROXIMATELY 389 MILLION LEGO BRICKS LONG.
- THE ACT OF STARING AT LOCKS, DAMS AND CANALS IS CALLED GONGOOZLING.
- IN BLACK HAWK'S BIOGRAPHY, HE STATES THAT A GUARDIAN SPIRIT LIVED IN A CAVE BELOW LOCK AND DAM 15, RESEMBLING A SWAN BUT 10 TIMES LARGER.
- THE FIRST REVIEW OF THE AREA'S RAPIDS WAS CONDUCTED BY LT. NAPOLEON BUFORD, WHOSE FAMILY OPENED THE FIRST GENERAL STORE IN ROCK ISLAND; THEIR HOME IS NOW THE WORD OF LIFE CHURCH.

# EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

By Jordan Raiff, Public Affairs Specialist

## Emma Aalbers Regulatory Project Manager



**Taking a moment with her dog, Aalbers and her family regularly enjoy the great outdoors.**

*Photo via Emma Aalbers*

**R**egulatory Project Manager Emma Aalbers found her professional calling with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The Grand Rapids, Minnesota, native, who now considers Ankeny, Iowa, her home, began her career with USACE as a student park ranger at Lake Ashtabula and Baldhill Dam for the St. Paul District. Pairing this work experience with dual bachelor's degrees in biology and fisheries and wildlife science from Valley City State University in Valley City, North Dakota, Aalbers got a strong start on her USACE journey.

Following graduation, she accepted a permanent position at The Dalles Lock and Dam along the Columbia River Gorge in Oregon, where she served as a seasonal permanent ranger. Less than a year later, she continued her climb by stepping into a full-time, permanent role as a natural resources specialist and park ranger.

She was then selected for a temporary promotion before accepting a position at Rend Lake in Benton, Illinois, in September 2014. While there, she wore many hats, including overseeing numerous contracts and performing daily quality assurance checks.

By 2015, Aalbers was ready for a new challenge and a ranger position at Saylorville Lake in Johnston, Iowa, provided that opportunity. In July 2022, she transitioned to the Regulatory Division, which allowed her more family time and professional growth.

For Aalbers, each day brings something new.

"As a regulatory project manager, we permit discharges of fill and/or dredged material into waters of the United States," she said. "As Rock Island District's mitigation bank managers, Dan Lange and I assist sponsors in the development and approval of their mitigation banking agreements. Our regulatory archaeologist, as well as our branch and division chiefs, also play a role in the approval process."

Aalbers, like many USACE employees, values the way her work has helped her grow while also making a difference.

"I like my job because I get to feel like I'm doing good for the environment, and I often see those changes. Seeing the restoration and mitigation that is being done is rewarding," she said. "I learned a lot in my past positions about public speaking, 'verbal judo,' and being thorough in your work. This job ties all of that together. I love talking to people and doing my best to help them—yet staying in my lane with regulations and the process."

Aalbers along with her husband, two daughters, and their black lab, enjoy spending time together going for walks, hunting, fishing, playing softball, and watching movies.

For those considering a career with USACE, Aalbers offers encouraging advice.

"USACE has the job you want. Accountant, park ranger, diver, lawyer, welder—there are opportunities with USACE," she said. "The work USACE does is truly a team effort. Each district I've worked for is very different, but the teamwork mentality remains the same. I am grateful for everyone along my career path. I never would have imagined doing the things I've done and being where I am now without them."

# Banking on Wetlands: The Role of Mitigation Credits in Environmental Restoration

By Jordan Raiff, Public Affairs Specialist

Changes to the environment due to innovation and economic growth happen across the globe every day. As part of its regulatory mission, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers oversees the permitting of new construction and evaluates its environmental impacts, both locally and globally.

Abby Steele serves as the Iowa Branch Chief for the Regulatory Division at the USACE Rock Island District. As Steele explained, her area of responsibility is unique: “We are in charge of regulating the placement of dredge or fill material in Waters of the United States (WOTUS). In the Rock Island District, this includes the state of Iowa, two-thirds of the state of Illinois, and just a bit of Missouri. St. Paul District’s Regulatory Division handles Minnesota and Wisconsin. Regulatory’s boundaries are completely different than those for civil works projects.”

Within these boundaries, Steele and others in the Regulatory Division ensure that the environmental impacts to the region’s waters are minimized.

“Permanent wetland impacts over one-tenth of an acre and permanent stream impacts over 0.03 acres usually requires mitigation,” said Steele. “That’s where mitigation banking comes in.”

According to Steele, previous mitigation efforts involved something called ‘permittee-responsible mitigation,’ where they would go out, find a site, and restore or enhance a wetland or stream.

“Many of these mitigation efforts were failing to replace lost aquatic functions effectively across the U.S.,” said Steele. “People weren’t maintaining the sites and it was also a nightmare to manage thousands of permittee-responsible mitigation sites.”

As Steele explained, “There was inconsistency in how mitigation was approved and managed across

the different USACE districts so the 2008 mitigation rule established uniform standards for planning, site selection, monitoring, performance criteria, and long-term maintenance. Mitigation bank approval takes about a year, and Rock Island District is the number one district in the nation for getting banks through the approval process the fastest.”

Getting these projects approved can be incredibly labor-intensive. Thankfully, USACE is equipped to help streamline the process.

“By working with mitigation bankers, USACE

helps facilitate a fair and efficient process for restoring wetlands and streams before construction begins,” said Steele.

As she explained, “These mitigation banks take the guesswork out of the equation for developers. Instead of navigating complex mitigation requirements on their own, companies receive a permit that specifies how many credits they need to offset their project’s impact.”

Continuing, Steele said, “from there, they contact the mitigation bank, purchase the required credits, and can then move forward. They are not permitted to begin construction or disturb WOTUS until those credits are secured. Securing these credits is relatively straightforward, according to Steele.

“Wetland credits are usually purchased on a one-to-one ratio. One acres equals one credit. In Iowa, the majority of our wetlands are in poor condition because historically they have been drained in the past. In areas with high-quality wetlands, the ratio can go up higher.”

In Iowa, areas ripe for restoration are plentiful, and many are eager to participate in the mission.

Steele added, “Our banks are very diverse here in Iowa. The first banks we established were with private landowners who learned about the mitigation banking industry. It can be a very lucrative business here



USACE Rock Island District Commander Col. Aaron Williams stands with Nahant Marsh Director of Operations Elizabeth Schramm during a visit to the marsh. Photo by Jordan Raiff

in Iowa. These landowners found out about it and realized they had a lot of farmland that was already wet.”

“What’s the easiest wetland to restore in Iowa? Farmed wetlands, because they’re tilled and some of these tiles have failed, causing water to accumulate. Plants like corn won’t grow well in these wetter areas, so what they can do is break the tile lines throughout the field, and the hydrology usually naturally returns,” Steele clarified.

Historically, tiles have been beneficial for farming, but they’ve changed the hydrology of the land. By transforming these areas back into proper wetlands, USACE is helping to reverse these changes. According to the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, over 11% of the state was naturally occurring wetlands before settlers attempted to tame the land. In the process, they stripped over 95% of those wetlands.


Through mitigation banking, these original wetlands are being restored, giving the soil, hydrology and hydrophytic vegetation an opportunity to heal and return to the nutrient-rich land Iowa is known for.

“Wetlands filter out pesticides, excess farm nutrients, and other pollutants, significantly improving water quality by absorbing and breaking them down,” said Steele. “The mitigation program doesn’t just aid in nutrient reduction, it also plays a vital role in reducing flood risks by allowing these natural areas to absorb and slow down stormwater.”

Naturally, this boom in mitigation credits is attracting new investment, as Matt Zehr, Regulatory Division Chief explained.

Zehr said, “In the past couple of years, mitigation companies have started entering Iowa and Illinois. While they’ve worked in other parts of the U.S., they’re just beginning to expand here. These companies have the financial means to look for sites and make contracts with landowners. The landowner retains ownership of the land, and the companies work with us to get the sites approved. They handle all the design work, engineering, and construction and become the bank sponsor.”

This shift in partnerships and responsibilities is having a significant impact on the Regulatory mission, not only in the Rock Island District but across the U.S., Zehr explained.

“Mitigation banking helps both our states and communities. We’re putting wetland and stream restorations on the ground—that’s amazing—but it also helps our program. My project managers’ jobs are made easier because of mitigation banks. If my project managers had to do permittee-responsible mitigation for every project requiring mitigation, it would significantly increase the permitting time for both us and applicant. Banking makes our review timeline more efficient, and research has shown that banks are more likely to result in a successful restoration than permittee responsible mitigation,” said Zehr. 

**Winding along I-80 in Coralville, Iowa, the Creekside Connection Singletrack Trail provides benefit to the environment as well as a scenic path for walking and biking. Photo by Jordan Raiff**



# EMERGING LEADER PROGRAM: BUILDING TOMORROW'S LEADERS TODAY

By Jim Finn, Public Affairs Specialist

For employees of the Rock Island District, stepping into future leadership roles may be easier than you think. The Emerging Leader Program (ELP), offered through the Mississippi Valley Division (MVD), is a transformative two-year journey that develops leadership skills, broadens regional perspectives and builds connections across the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Participants engage in professional training, mentorship, developmental assignments and shadowing experiences with senior leaders. The program is designed to challenge individuals while giving them practical tools and insights to grow as leaders.

"I am currently just past halfway through year one of the two-year program, and my experience has been very positive," said Kelly Thomas, Deputy Operations Manager for the Mississippi River Project and ELP participant. "In my opinion, the access to senior leadership within the Rock Island District as well as MVD is probably the biggest benefit of the EL Program."

That access comes in many forms, from

attending high-level stakeholder meetings to participating in special events and congressional engagements. One standout experience for Thomas was traveling to Washington, D.C., for a training.

"The highlight of the program so far has been attending the Government Affairs Institute training in Washington, D.C., which focuses on how the legislative process works and how USACE is integrated within that process," said Thomas.

A key component of the program is one-on-one mentorship. Each Emerging Leader is paired with a senior mentor outside of their district to help guide their development.

"My mentor is Karl Jansen, Deputy for Programs and Project Management in the St. Paul District," Thomas shared. "The interaction we've had has been very beneficial and supportive. Karl has been very open about his experiences—both successes and failures. Learning from his roadmap has been invaluable and gives me lessons I'll reflect on when I must make the tough calls."

Despite its many benefits, the program also comes with challenges.

"The mission never stops," Thomas noted. "Navigating the time commitment and requirements for the EL program alongside daily responsibilities can be tough."

Thomas added that current travel restrictions have also been challenging.

"Virtual meetings have limited face-to-face interaction with senior leaders, which is one of the program's biggest strengths," he said.

Still, Thomas and other ELP participants have found tremendous value in connecting with other districts and gaining a broader view of MVD operations.

"The Emerging Leaders Program helps participants learn how to manage time, have structured discussions with leadership, and form lasting relationships," said




**Kelly Thomas (left, orange shirt), Deputy Operations Manager for the Mississippi River Project and ELP participant leads a tour of Locks and Dam 15 in Rock Island, Illinois. The tour group was comprised of members from the Rivers of Illinois Coordinating Council and Military Economic Development Committee after their quarterly meetings held at the Rock Island Arsenal on June 11.**

*Photo by Jim Finn*

Emerging Leader Micki Meier, who is a Project Manager at the Rock Island District. "Any participant is sure to gain valuable experience and form relationships that can be leaned upon throughout their career - it's a fantastic opportunity!"

The application window for inclusion into this year's Emerging Leader Program recently closed, but a new window will open again in May 2026. New participants will be announced soon and will be officially inducted at the annual regional governance meeting in late October, where program graduates are also recognized.


To be considered for the program, applicants must have a minimum of three years of service and be a full-time employee at the level of GS-11 through GS-13, WG-9 and above, and Officers, O-4 and below. Qualified employees should work with their supervisors to complete the application process and nomination packages are approved by the supervisory chain. Each district's ELP Selection Board selects and nominates two ELs annually.

For those ready to step out of their comfort zone, connect with mentors and lead with purpose, the Emerging Leaders Program offers an impactful path forward! 

## • AROUND THE DISTRICT •



On June 26 Captain Nathan Rector was promoted to Major. Selected as a part of the merit promotion system, Rector was promoted ahead of his time in grade by being part of the top 15% of all Captains in the Engineering Corps. A true credit to USACE, he has since taken his leadership and excellence to Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri, where he will continue his career, now as a field-grade officer.

Pinning the new gold oak leaf clusters on his shoulders are his mother Janice (left) and wife Regina. 

Can you name where this photo was taken?



Last Issue's Winner



Answer: Bat Box; Thompson Causeway  
Winner: Bruce Hayden

Send guesses to: [jordan.n.raiff@usace.army.mil](mailto:jordan.n.raiff@usace.army.mil)



# Safety First and Always



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