

J. SCOTT CHRISTIANSON

State pledges \$10 million to buy flood-damaged land



The Missouri Department of Conservation recently pledged \$10 million to buy land destroyed by last year's Missouri River flooding. The money, which the department scraped together by delaying planned construction and rearranging its priorities, will be used along with funds pledged by other agencies and private organizations in a department-run initiative called "Partnership for Missouri Wetlands."

"On the Missouri River alone, last

year's floods buried nearly 60,000 acres of land under at least 2 feet of sand," state conservation director Jerry Presley said. "Removing 2 feet of sand costs \$3,200 an acre, assuming you have somewhere to put it. Most landowners don't have that kind of money. It's a terrible blow to them"

The buyout plan allows landowners to sell their land to the department for a fair price; no land will be condemned or otherwise taken. Local

governments that depend on property taxes will not lose revenue from the buyout because the state will make payments in lieu of taxes on land it buys.

The department will manage levees on the land for flood protection, increased floodway capacity and fish and wildlife habitat. Land covered with sand probably will be reforested, and areas where topsoil was scoured away will be converted to fish and wildlife habitat. Restored areas will be allowed to flood naturally, thereby increasing the capacity of the land to hold floodwaters and reducing the danger to developed areas. When possible, the department will buy entire levee districts, then re-establish floodways.

The department would lease to local farmers some of the undamaged farmland it might buy. While the land would be somewhat protected, floodwaters would be allowed to slowly enter these areas during heavy flooding — slow enough that the current wouldn't wash away topsoil or deposit sand.

"Rebuilding all the levees where they were before won't improve the floodway's capacity to contain future floods," Presley said. "Rebuilding levees to their former specifications won't discourage development in the flood plain either, and that could lead to even greater losses in future floods."

"Our paramount consideration in charting floodway recovery should be reduction of human suffering. The proposal we are offering will restore the river's capacity to hold water outside developing areas, reduce flood crests and curtail the economic damage of future floods. It will also en-

hance the value of our rivers for fish, wildlife and forest resources and create new recreational opportunities."

The buyout plan is good for landowners and Missouri's natural resources. The conservation department administration — Presley and the Missouri Conservation Commission — should be commended for their initiative in allocating the money and designing a plan that protects against future floods while allowing landowners to relieve themselves of flood-damaged property at a fair price. The effort is especially noteworthy because it is mandated by neither state nor federal government. Rather, the conservation department saw a way to turn tragedy into opportunity and acted on it.

"Jerry Presley and MDC have again demonstrated the leadership for which they are known both nationally and worldwide," said Joe Barnes, president of the Greater Ozarks Chapter of the Izaak Walton League. "The willingness of the department to dedicate a significant amount of design money is unique ... and under the circumstances is the best possible approach to conserving our natural resources and relieving the situation in which many landowners have found themselves."

ANNUAL GREENBELT MEETING

The Greenbelt Coalition of Mid-Missouri is inviting the public to attend its annual meeting and potluck picnic from 4 to 7 p.m. May 21 at Rock Bridge Memorial State Park. This is a great opportunity to learn about the coalition and talk with key members. The first ever Greenbelt Citizen of the Year Award also will be presented. For more information, call 443-4401.