

THE MERAMEC BASIN PROJECT – A LOOK BACK

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The Meramec River Watershed drains over 4,000 square miles of the Ozarks in eastern Missouri through clear, spring-fed streams which join the Mississippi just south of St. Louis. Proposals to dam the Meramec River started in the 1830's for navigation purposes, but were not taken seriously until the Mississippi River floods of 1927 and 1937. In 1938, Congress authorized the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to construct large flood control projects within the Mississippi Watershed, including the Meramec. The Ozarks were a disproportionately large contributor to flooding and projects were proposed in the region.

Large dams in southern Missouri and northern Arkansas were constructed until 1949 when Missouri's governor stopped all large dam projects in the state. This action canceled several projects and postponed plans on the Meramec for over a decade. The Meramec Basin Project began in 1962 and called for the construction of up to 31 reservoirs, many of these small, in the mostly rural watershed. The project plans were met with both support and opposition from local groups. Landowners within the proposed impoundment didn't want to lose their property and relaxed lifestyle to hordes of reservoir-based tourism. Environmentalists opposed the dam in favor of free-flowing streams and protection of endangered species occupying the watershed. Other detractors claimed that the karst geology at the damsites would likely lead to delays and cost overruns. Many residents of surrounding towns favored the dams for: the increased tourism and development, the addition of temporary construction funding to the local economy, and water supply for light industry.

Initially, many of St. Louisans favored of the dams, believing they would provide flat-water recreation. Propaganda rose from both sides. Locals landowners began looking on the project favorably, believing hat the influx in tourism would boost economic development of the area, like similar projects on the Osage and White Rivers, northwest and southeast of the area. St. Louis residents began to align with the ecological proponents in deciding that they preferred the river in its natural state.

Foundation preparation of the largest dam had already begun when a non-binding referendum by the affected counties was voted upon in 1978. A concentration of voters against the project in Metropolitan St. Louis overwhelmed those in rural surrounding counties strongly favoring the dams. Failure at the ballot prompted Congress to re-evaluate and, ultimately, de-authorize the project.