

Drawdown at Emiquon Benefits Plants, Wildlife, Levees

Several years ago, TNC installed an award-winning water control structure that reconnects Emiquon to the Illinois River for the health of the preserve and the fish, plant and wildlife communities that rely on it for survival. This summer, the structure was used to draw down water levels to improve habitat for the species that call the preserve home and make major repairs at Emiquon.

The integrity of the levee between Emiquon and the Illinois River has been degrading due to many years of prolonged exposure to high water. As storms and flooding events become more powerful and frequent as the climate changes, the levee and other infrastructure designed to protect both people and nature must be maintained.

“The levee, unfortunately, had water standing against it for many years because we had no way to drain it, and the inside of our levee wasn’t designed for that. Waves have caused erosion and burrowing by beavers and muskrats has further compromised its stability, making levee failure a growing concern,” explained Doug Blodgett, the chapter’s director of river conservation.

For that reason, water at the preserve was drawn down this summer in order to make necessary repairs to the levee and other infrastructure.

“Water levels at Emiquon have actually been slowly decreasing for the past two years with gravity flow of water through the structure to the river,” Doug said.

“But we need to take the added step of drawing down the water farther with pumps so we can make the critical repairs essential to maintaining the levee—



the health and safety of the site and our neighbors are dependent on it.”

A co-benefit of the drawdown is that mudflats were exposed in the process. Lower water levels and exposure to sunlight allowed the soil to dry out and “firm up,” which will reduce sediment resuspension and improve water clarity, creating healthier wetland plant communities. These healthier plant communities will, in turn, provide essential habitat for robust and diverse fish populations and food for hundreds of

thousands of migratory waterfowl and other water birds.

“We named the structure ‘Ahsapa,’ which means “web” in Myaamia, the language used by Native Americans who were the land’s early inhabitants, and it reflects how everything in nature is connected,” Doug explained. “The lower water levels we had this summer will greatly benefit aquatic plants, and those benefits will work their way up the food chain to small fish, larger fish and waterfowl.”