

94.11

Press Democrat 5-25-94

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Flood control report urges broad changes

By JOHN H. CUSHMAN Jr.
New York Times

WASHINGTON — A year after the Mississippi River and many of its tributaries spilled over their banks, devastating much of the nation's midsection, a committee of government experts is urging the Clinton administration to abandon the Army Corps of Engineers' longstanding preference for dams and levees as the primary means of controlling floods.

The committee's draft recommendations, to be made public today after an intensive review that began in January, call instead for greater efforts to promote the evacuation of risky flood plains, the relocation of businesses and farms to higher ground and the restoration of natural flood cycles.

"It is a fairly hefty set of recommendations," a White House official said of the report, which culminates nearly a year of soul searching by federal agencies in the aftermath of the catastrophic flooding in the upper Midwest last summer.

Policy reversal

Environmental groups that have long called for basic changes in how the government deals with floods said they view the recom-

mendations as a wholesale retreat by the Corps and a remarkable reversal of federal policies.

The Corps of Engineers and Congress are expected to rely heavily on the panel's recommendations. John Zirschley, the assistant secretary of the Army for Public Works, will present the findings at a Senate hearing on this year's water projects legislation Thursday.

"This is like asking Mahatma Gandhi to take up arms," said Scott Faber, the director of flood plain programs for American Rivers, a conservation and preservation group in Washington, who has consulted closely with the advisory committee.

Local input

Brig. Gen. Gerald Galloway, an Army engineer who directed the task force, said it had already consulted closely with governors and mayors, visiting 63 communities before drafting its recommendations.

But the general, who is dean of the academic board at the Military Academy at West Point, said he would not be able to comment on the document until it is officially presented to the administration.