In the heart of the Mississippi Delta, the Big Sunflower River begins in Coahoma County, Mississippi, and flows for 250 miles until it reaches the Yazoo River, a tributary of the Mississippi River. According to the EPA, the Big Sunflower supports some of the nation’s richest wetland and aquatic resources, and is an important stop for migrating birds along the Mississippi River Flyway. Hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation fuel the state’s nature tourism industry, generating $8 billion per year according to the Outdoor Industry Association. Many famous blues musicians launched their careers on the banks of the Big Sunflower River, including Sam Cooke, Ike Turner, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Son House, James “Super Chikan” Johnson and 2020 Grammy nominee Christone “Kingfish” Ingram.

While agricultural production is common throughout the Big Sunflower River watershed, nearly one-quarter of the region has been protected as public land or enrolled in conservation programs that have restored it to native forest. Despite conservation efforts, agricultural water withdrawals and pollution have had a major impact on the watershed since at least the 1970s.

The Big Sunflower River is threatened by an effort to resurrect the destructive Yazoo Backwater Pumps — a project that would drain and damage 200,000 acres of nationally significant wetlands. In 2008, the Bush administration’s Environmental Protection Agency acknowledged the severe damage the project would cause and vetoed it under authority of the Clean Water Act. However, project supporters have renewed their calls to override the veto and immediately begin construction. Instead of reviving this costly and damaging boondoggle, EPA and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers should prioritize immediate flood relief and smart safeguards for local communities, while conserving vital wetlands that provide natural flood protection.

The Big Sunflower River is threatened by an effort to resurrect the destructive Yazoo Backwater Pumps — a project that would drain and damage 200,000 acres of wetlands in the heart of the Mississippi Delta. Authorized by Congress in 1941, the project was touted to provide flood control for the area between the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers, just north of Vicksburg, Mississippi. However, a 2007 report by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers made clear that the project was not designed to protect communities from flooding. Instead, 80 percent of project’s benefits would be agricultural, by draining tens of thousands of acres of wetlands to boost production of surplus commodity crops for trade. At that time, it was clear the proposed pumps were an environmentally devastating and extremely costly project designed to intensify agriculture. As a result, in 2008, George W. Bush administration’s EPA stopped the project by issuing a veto through the Clean Water Act — one of 13 such vetoes ever issued.
The Yazoo Pumps would degrade tens of thousands of acres of public lands that taxpayers have long paid to protect and manage for people and wildlife. These areas include four national wildlife refuges, the Delta National Forest and State Wildlife Management Areas, private lands enrolled in the Wetlands Reserve and Conservation Reserve Programs, and restored mitigation lands — rich habitats that support hundreds of fish and wildlife species, including 20 percent of our nation’s duck population, the Mississippi black bear, the federally listed endangered pondberry plant and several at-risk species of freshwater mussels.

Unfortunately, pump proponents are pushing to revive the project in the wake of the climate change-fueled Mississippi River flood of 2019, which caused prolonged flooding in the low-lying areas that would be drained by the Yazoo Pumps. However, the Corps has acknowledged that at least 68 percent of the lands flooded in this area would still have been underwater in 2019 if the pumps had been in operation. The Corps has also said that operating the pumps in 2019 would have caused higher flood levels in the Yazoo and Mississippi rivers, increasing flood risks for downstream communities. The pumps would push 9 billion gallons of water per day into an already flooded Yazoo River.

In short, the incredibly destructive, $440 million Yazoo Pumps would provide little, if any, protection to homes in the sparsely populated area that the pumps are supposed to protect, and could increase flooding in downstream communities. The Trump administration has ignored far less costly and less damaging measures that could provide real protections to communities in the Mississippi Delta. Instead, the administration is working to overturn the 2008 veto — an unprecedented action that would lead to the use of hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars to degrade massive flood-absorbing wetlands, while undermining critical protections provided by the Clean Water Act and the National Environmental Policy Act.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

Federal programs are funded and available today to help provide cost-effective, environmentally sound protections for people’s lives and property. These common-sense measures include elevating homes and roads, voluntary buyouts and relocations, and compensating farmers who volunteer to take their land out of production and restore it back to wetlands. Wetlands on private and public land store water and are the foundation of the local hunting and recreational economy. Rural and urban communities across the United States are embracing these natural infrastructure and non-structural measures to provide immediate relief and manage long-term flood risk.

Like all Clean Water Act vetoes, EPA’s veto of the Yazoo Pumps was based on a rigorous analysis of potential impacts, as well as broad public input, and it was issued to permanently block construction of an exceptionally destructive project. However, some members of Congress and the Trump administration are actively working to dismantle the veto and other long-standing environmental protections and legacies of past presidents. It is critical that the public speak out to defend this ecologically significant place from destruction and defend the integrity of the Clean Water Act and its critical veto authority. It is also vitally important that local leaders immediately make use of affordable and effective flood risk solutions to protect affected people’s lives, property and livelihoods.