



# Corps Points!

US Army Corps  
of Engineers®

US Army Corps of Engineers, Public Affairs Office  
*A compendium of facts and key points*

5 May 2009

## USACE Vegetation Standards for Flood Damage Reduction Infrastructure

### Background

- Public safety is the number one priority of the USACE Levee Safety Program.
- Clear policies and standards, consistently applied and enforced, are critical components of the USACE Levee Safety Program.
- In order to clarify and better communicate vegetation-management standards, USACE has reviewed its national policy and standards and has developed Engineering Technical Letter (ETL) No. 1110-2-571 *Guidelines for Landscape Planting and Vegetation Management at Levees, Floodwalls, Embankment Dams, and Appurtenant Structures*.
- This ETL does not establish **new** standards, but clarifies, and supersedes, those formerly presented in EM 1110-2-301 (Jan. 1, 2000).
- An Independent External Peer Review and Independent Technical Review (ITR) validated the ETL based upon existing and available engineering and scientific data.
- The clarified standards outlined in the ETL are mandatory: they apply to all flood damage reduction projects in the Corps' program, and will be incorporated into applicable Levee Safety Program processes and guidance.

### Next Steps

- Existing scientific literature does not conclusively validate or invalidate current USACE vegetation standards. USACE is currently undertaking a two-year research program to enable reassessment of its engineering-based understanding of the public safety consequences of vegetation on flood damage reduction projects.
- Any change to current USACE vegetation management policy and standards will be based upon sound engineering and science, and will not adversely affect public safety.
- Independent Peer Review recommendations have been incorporated into the research plan; are being incorporated into the revision of vegetation variance policy and other guidance; and will be incorporated into any post-research updating of vegetation-management policy and standards.
- Public safety will remain the paramount consideration.

### Key Points

- Fifteen feet is the minimally accepted vegetation free zone (VFZ) and is widely viewed as not sufficient for all projects. To date, no research exists to justify a reduction to existing standards.
- If an existing project easement (real estate interest) allows for less than 15 feet, the VFZ shall be the maximum attainable within the existing real estate interest.
- The ETL discusses a limited range of conditions under which a variance to vegetation standards may be granted. The variance request process is currently under revision and interim guidance is available through the HQUSACE Levee Safety Program Manager (LSPM). Public safety will not be compromised.
- The standards in the ETL are not new, and USACE has considered them critical to flood damage reduction project reliability for decades.
- The ETL is available at: <http://140.194.76.129/publications/eng-tech-ltrs/etl1110-2-571/toc.htm>



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9 June 2009

## Response to June 9, 2009, Associated Press article about tree removal on levees

### Corrections to the record

- Error: The Corps ordered thousands of trees chopped down.
- Fact: The Corps notifies levee project sponsors of operation and maintenance deficiencies, which may include vegetation, animal burrows, encroachments, and closure structures. These deficiencies must be corrected to remain eligible in this voluntary program for federal rehabilitation and repair assistance following a flood.
- Error: the Corps "is on a mission to chop down every tree in the country that grows within 15 feet of a levee..."
- Fact: The mission of the Corps' levee safety program is to make sure levee systems are reliable and do not present unacceptable risks to the public, property or the environment, with the emphasis on public safety. The Corps has specific authorities for approximately 2,000 levees, or 14,000 miles across the country; not the 100,000 miles stated by the AP.
- Error: The anti-tree policy arose from criticism directed at the Corps after Katrina.
- Fact: The Corps' vegetation management standards are not new, and the Corps has considered them critical to flood damage reduction project reliability for decades.

### Key Points

- Public safety is the number one priority of the Corps Levee Safety Program and will remain the paramount consideration.
- Proper operation and maintenance (O&M) of levee systems is a critical component of public safety and the consequences of O&M issues, such as vegetation on levees, floodwalls or dams, go beyond a breach or failure. While vegetation and other encroachments can harm the structural integrity of the infrastructure, it can also obscure visibility for visual inspections, impede access for maintenance and inspection, and/or hinder emergency flood fighting operations.
- Clear policies and standards, which includes vegetation management, consistently applied and enforced through continuous and periodic inspections and assessments, are critical components of the Corps Levee Safety Program.
- An Independent External Peer Review and Independent Technical Review validated the existing standard based upon available engineering and scientific data.
- Existing scientific literature does not conclusively validate or invalidate current USACE vegetation standards. USACE is currently undertaking a two-year research program to enable reassessment of its engineering-based understanding of the public safety consequences of vegetation on flood damage reduction projects.
- Any change to current USACE vegetation management policy and standards will be based upon sound engineering and science, and will not adversely affect public safety.
- Independent Peer Review recommendations have been incorporated into the research plan; are being incorporated into the revision of vegetation variance policy and other guidance; and will be incorporated into any post-research updating of vegetation-management policy and standards.
- Fifteen feet is the minimally accepted vegetation free zone and is widely viewed as not sufficient for all projects. To date, no research exists to justify a reduction to existing standards.
- The Corps provides a limited range of conditions under which a variance to vegetation standards may be granted. The variance request process is currently under revision and interim guidance is available through the Corps Levee Safety Program Manager. **Public safety will not be compromised.**