



**HOW HIGH?:** Warsaw farmer Sam Zumwalt recalls pushing additional sand up on this levee with his son, Joe, in the bulldozer.



# Down but not out

By **HOLLY SPANGLER**

## Key Points

- Drainage districts see delay in receiving flood reimbursement.
- Multiple layers of bureaucracy have frustrated farmers.
- Crop insurance rates might be affected by levee repair work.

If you've never seen a levee break, it's hard to imagine," describes Warsaw farmer Sam Zumwalt.

"When a levee breaks, the water scours the land," he continues. "A 40-acre field will be 15 feet lower. It's just gone. When the water goes back and you stand and look over the levee, it's like looking over a cliff.

"That soil is gone forever. It's nothing but rock. It'll be a wetland or trees will grow up in it. It can never be farmed again."

Zumwalt knows of what he speaks. He's a third-generation farmer in the Mississippi River bottoms whose family watched floodwaters consume more than 2,500 acres of their land during the June 2008 floods. He lived through the flood of

1993 and, as commissioner of the Hunt Drainage District, he's dealt with his fair share of disasters and government officials. These days, he'd come close to arguing that those last two are one and the same.

Like a lot of river-bottom landowners, Zumwalt has spent much of the past nine months fighting floodwater, repairing and rebuilding, and working to ensure pump stations and levees are ready for the next crop season. For many Illinois

farmers, 2008 was a long one. But for those on both the east and west sides of the state who watched waters engulf their land, the season that never got started has yet to come to an end.

## Long flood fight

Zumwalt is one of a group of landowners in the Mississippi River bottoms who contacted Illinois Department of Agriculture Director Tom Jennings this winter, asking for help streamlining their flood recovery efforts. Among their complaints: thick layers of bureaucracy, untimely flood fight

restitution and difficulty dealing with the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Zumwalt explains that in order to get something as simple (and yet urgent) as sandbags, he had to contact his local Emergency Service Disaster Agency director, who contacted the Illinois Emergency Management Agency, who contacted FEMA. FEMA then directed the Corps of Engineers to deliver sandbags. As Zumwalt explains it, the corps already knew they needed to sandbag; they just weren't allowed to do it without FEMA orders.

"Why should I have to go

through four layers to get to the corps, so they can do the job they already knew they had to do?" Zumwalt questions. "It's burdensome. You have to explain everything to every one of them."

## Efficient government?

Reimbursements for flood fight costs have also been slower in Illinois, as compared to Missouri and Iowa. According to Dianne Barnett, farm manager for Adwell Corp. and commissioner of Lima Lake Drainage District, it's taken seven months to receive checks to cover their initial costs, amounting to \$70,000.

## Another river, another flood

FLOODING impacted the east side of the state as well in 2008. In Lawrence County, which borders Indiana and sits next to the Wabash River, floodwater washed over 32,000 acres of farmland this past June. The first of three levee breaks occurred on June 10 along the Embarras River, which cuts through the middle of the county. Another levee on the Wabash River gave way, as well.

Little impact remains today, reports Emily Bakken, manager of the Lawrence County Farm Bureau. Water receded within a few weeks, and roads were cleared and folks were back in their homes. Farmers were planting by mid-July, though many switched from corn and beans to sorghum and vegetable crops. And although a lot of people still await insurance payments, Bakken says the Corps of Engineers worked hard to repair levees this past fall.

**PROGRESS:** When the levee broke directly under the service bridge shown here, water swirled to the north and made a direct hit on bins at Ursa Farmers Co-op. The levee was rebuilt in November.

