

OLD RIVER CONTROL PROJECT

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Old River is a distinctive river with a remarkable history. Fifty miles northwest of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, it connects the Red, Atchafalaya, and Mississippi Rivers. Like all alluvial rivers, the Mississippi winds through its valleys, caving banks and topping them during floods. Occasionally, as it meanders across its floodplain it creates or obtains a steeper route to its ultimate outlet. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Atchafalaya River offered the Mississippi River a shorter outlet to the Gulf of Mexico – 142 miles compared to 315. By 1951, it was apparent that, unless man intervened, the Mississippi would take the course of the Atchafalaya. If the Mississippi changed course, it would turn the present river channel into a saltwater estuary and the effects on southern Louisiana would be catastrophic. Likewise, the Atchafalaya River could not accept the Mississippi flow without massive flooding, extensive relocations, and the upheaval of the social and economic patterns of that area. A new route would render hundreds of millions of dollars worth of flood control projects useless along the lower Mississippi, and expensive flood control projects would be required in the newly created Mississippi delta. On September 3, 1954, Congress authorized the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to construct the Old River Control Project. This project was designed to prevent the Mississippi River from changing its course. Congress also mandated that the flow distribution at Old River should be maintained at approximately the same proportions as occurred naturally in 1950, then determined to be approximately 30 percent of the total latitude flow (combined flow in the Red and Mississippi Rivers above the control structures) passing down the Atchafalaya River on an annual basis with the remaining 70 percent passing down the Mississippi River. Flows through the Old River Control Structures (which now include a private hydropower facility) are regulated to this 70/30 distribution. This discussion will review the history of the Old River Control Project, the flow and sediment distribution requirements, and occasions when small deviations from the mandated distribution have occurred. Potential impacts from changing the current distribution will also be discussed.