

from our viewpoint...

## Missouri river flow costing us money

While it hasn't affected drought-stricken Western Kansas as much, federal efforts to maintain the flow of the Missouri River for barge traffic have sapped water levels in key reservoirs, costing Kansas businesses millions in tourism and recreation income.

The Army Corps of Engineers, which run the flood control reservoirs in eastern Kansas – and some in the west as well – says it's powerless to stop the diversion. Congress requires the Corps to maintain enough flow on the Missouri to allow navigation as far as Sioux City, Iowa, the agency says, and it has no choice in the matter.

"We don't have the option to decide not to do it one year or other years because of drought," said a Corps official quoted by the Associated Press.

That may be true, but it's all the more reason for Missouri River states to band together to fight this waste of our water. The Corps said it's required by law to keep the river up through the "navigation season," from April 1 to December 1 – regardless of how that affects upstream reservoirs.

While the Missouri once was considered navigable well into Montana, today it's blocked by dams in South Dakota and northern Nebraska. (Though there are still a couple of draw bridges way up in Montana.)

The sandy, wandering Missouri was a tough river for old-time boat captains. The average lifespan of a riverboat was said to be only a couple of years. Then the corps narrowed and deepened the river, allowing navigation at the cost of millions – and much environmental damage.

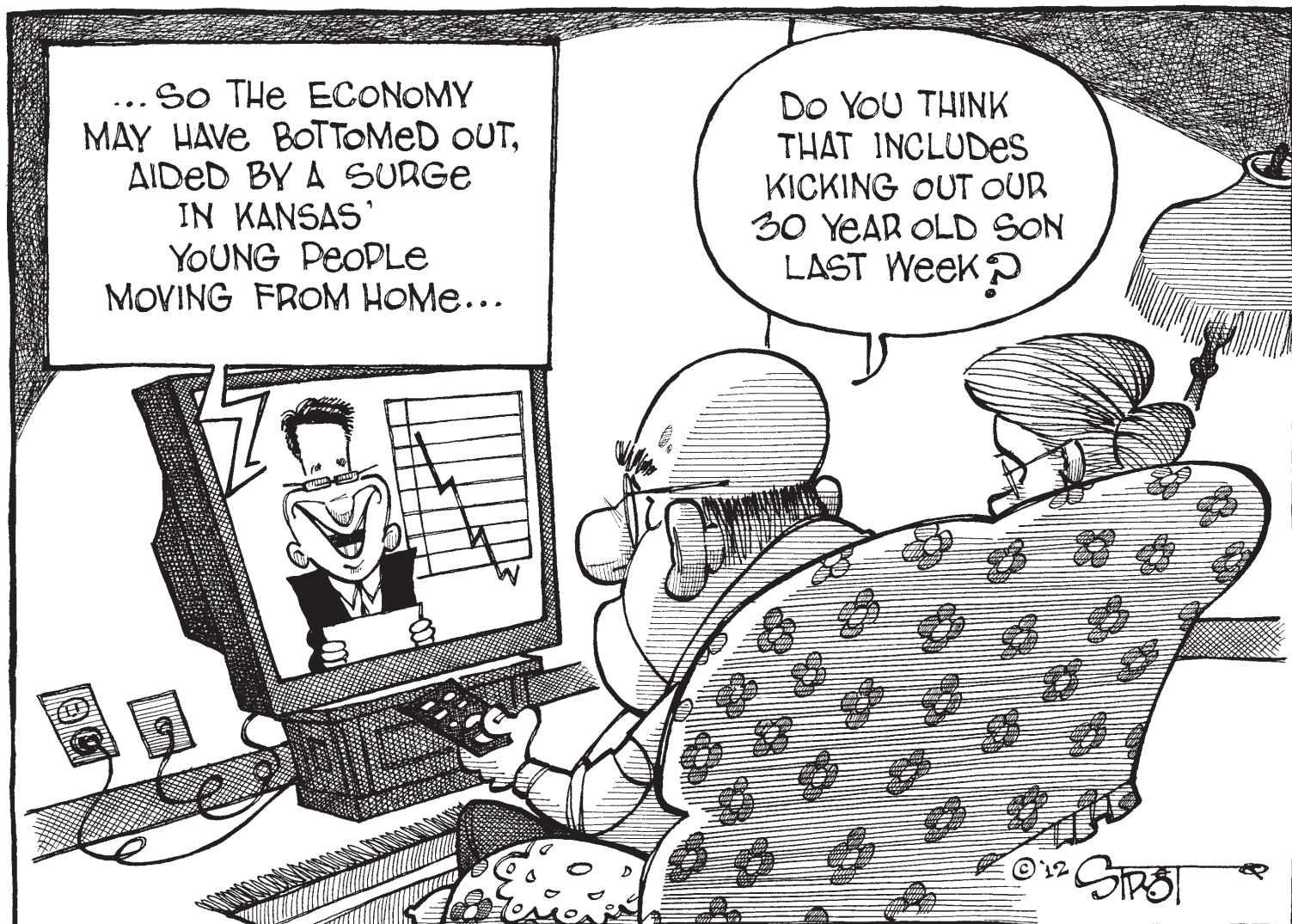
The deeper, faster water still raises issues for wildlife and sport fishing today, and makes the river much more dangerous for recreation.

Barge traffic this year has been minimal. The AP reports that only about 200 barges reached Kansas City this year, compared to an estimated 40,000 that moved past St. Louis on the Mississippi. That's a 10th of what used the Missouri at the peak of barge traffic.

At the big eastern Kansas reservoirs – Tuttle Creek, Perry and Milford – the Corps has lowered lake levels three to six feet, leaving docks and boat ramps impaired or unusable. One new houseboat dock is said to have been damaged when it settled on rocks. Fishermen and others have trouble finding a place to put in.

All of this is costing Kansans money, and that's not fair to those who have invested in facilities at Kansas reservoirs or the towns that depend on this business. The effect on upstream states must be similar, all the way to Montana.

We know, in a dry year, lakes levels are bound to fall. And those who built at Kansas lakes knew going in the Corps has a duty to keep the river up. But it's a question of overall economic good, and from here, it looks like we'd be better off to scuttle barge traffic and let the railroads handle the grain and coal a little farther east. – *Steve Haynes*



## Bureaucracy before bravery

While we continue to see and hear stories about America's veterans receiving subpar medical care, the bureaucrats charged with overseeing the health needs of our brave men and women in uniform are apparently sparing no expense in taking care of themselves instead.

As a member of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee I take very seriously our responsibility to provide oversight of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). So this summer when it came to light that the VA spent more than \$50,000 on a video featuring a General Patton impersonator, we demanded to know more. We feared it was just the tip of the iceberg.

And the tip of the iceberg it was. Our own internal digging uncovered the first shock: at least \$2.5 million spent last year on the "National Veterans Golden Age Games" hosted at the luxurious Hilton Hawaiian Village in Honolulu.

While on paper the Golden Age Games seem like a noble cause to provide senior veterans with an Olympic-style sports competition, is it really a prudent use of our taxpayer resources and theirs to have held this event at one of the top - and most expensive - vacation destinations in 2011? No. With so many wounded warriors and homeless veterans, was it right for the VA to spend more than \$1 million on an event planner who works in Alaska? Of course not. Was it right to spend thousands



**tim huelskamp**  
• u.s. rep.

of dollars on floral arrangements, polo shirts, and a Polynesian outrigger canoe exhibition? Doubt it.

How can these bureaucrats look our veterans in eye and with straight faces when they are swiping the taxpayers' credit card like there is no tomorrow?

No doubt the cost of airfare and lodging was cost-prohibitive for many veterans who in the past traveled to centrally-located places like Leavenworth in 1997, Topeka in 2000, Des Moines in 2010, or St. Louis this summer. But, of course it was not cost-prohibitive for VA to send 178 employees. The taxpayers picked up the tab for them. Sounds like a nice work trip, right?

In the meantime, we filed a congressional inquiry with the VA to get more information about the conferences. And then we waited. And waited. A few weeks later, the VA's Chief Financial Officer testified before our Committee and ultimately admitted that in 2011 VA spent \$100 million hard-earned taxpayer dollars on conferences - including \$80 million just for bureaucrat travel alone.

Finally, nearly a month after our initial

request, the VA delivered a list of its 2011 conferences including details about the numbers of participants, the purported reasons for the conferences, and the admitted costs.

According to these data, the VA hosted 373 conferences in 2011 with a total cost of \$67 million. Top destinations included Texas, Nevada (Las Vegas), and Florida. About one-third of the total amount spent on conferences was spent in one of these states.

But also, perhaps even more shocking (but not surprising with this Administration) was that about \$5 million was spent on training unions on how to comply with the labor agreement they reached with the VA. As part of the labor contract, the taxpayer-funded VA is required to pay for workers to learn more about the labor agreement. Who would have thought that these twenty-five five-day conferences would be held in such fun destinations as Atlantic City, Las Vegas, Nashville, and San Juan (Puerto Rico)?

As if it were not enough that the VA continues operations like this when our veterans are suffering, they are doing so amid Obama's trillion-dollar plus annual deficits and a massive \$16 trillion in debt. When American businesses were forced to tighten their belts, many did away with conferences and expensive travel for their employees. Washington, on the other hand, just kept spending - even when America's brave veterans should have been the higher, and certainly nobler priority.

## Science fiction milestones

Last week, or this week depending on where you lived, marks the 25th anniversary of the debut of "Star Trek: The Next Generation."

The pilot episode of TNG, as it is known by many fans today, first aired on Sept. 28, 1987, although in some parts of the country it aired later.

The pilot episode "Encounter at Farpoint," has never been a favorite of mine. In fact, the first several seasons were a bit rocky. There were some questionable decisions, like killing a major character, poor scripts, episodes that were border-line racist and some of the general weirdness that can turn a lot of people off to sci-fi. It wasn't until the third season that it really started getting good. After that it became one of the best television series of all time.

I was only 3 years old when the Enterprise-D warped onto the small screen. My introduction to Star Trek came later, but not much later. I began watching Star Trek when I was a kid. My parents weren't Trekkies in particular, but they had seen episodes of the old 60s Star Trek and had been to see the movies, and when those came out on video (on those new-fangled, hi-tech VCRs), they shared them with me.

My first memory of Star Trek is watching "Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home," or as it was affectionately known in my house: "the one with the whales." A brilliant and funny movie. I was hooked from then on.

I began watching TNG sometime in its seventh and final season, when one spinoff, "Deep Space Nine," was up and running and another, "Voyager" was being prepared.

I grew up with Star Trek. From the time I started watching when I was 9 until I was 20, there was never a year when there wasn't some Star Trek on the small screen. As I got older and understood more, I began to realize that Star Trek is about more than just space battles. It was about using a sci-fi setting to examine the human condition and take a hard look at issues we face today. Throughout five series and 11 movies, Star Trek has tackled subjects like slavery, equal rights, political repression, sexual identity, and much more. Above all it was an optimistic view of where humanity is going in the future, and while I don't always buy into that rosy vision



**kevin bottrell**  
• simple tricks and nonsense

of things to come, it is uplifting.

I still enjoy Star Trek, even though there's less of it around than there used to be. Latest news, aside from a new movie coming out next year, is that actor Michael Dorn – who played Worf on The Next Generation and Deep Space Nine – was trying to get a new television series started. Fingers crossed.

Speaking of science fiction, another seminal television series from the 90s reached a milestone last week, but unfortunately is was a far more tragic one.

Actor Michael O'Hare died last Friday at the age of 60. O'Hare was best known, to me anyway, as Commander Jeffrey Sinclair on "Babylon 5." He was the lead actor on the series for its first season back in 1994 before leaving the show.

More a stage actor than a screen actor, he originated the role of Lt. Col. Nathan Jessup in "A Few Good Men" on Broadway. At first, it's a little difficult to imagine anyone besides Jack Nicholson doing the "You can't handle the truth!" speech, but watching him play the sometimes-hard nosed commander of a space station, you can easily imagine him growling out that great courtroom monologue.

Babylon 5 was a great leap forward in story-

telling. Although similar to Star Trek, it offered a sweeping, well-thought-out five-year story arc that tied itself together in a way that no Star Trek show ever did. That kind of serialized storytelling is much more common today, but back in the 90s, just about every show was episodic in nature, with everything turning back to the status quo at the end of every 43 minutes.

Even though he was only on for one out of five seasons, O'Hare was still integral to the show, and a great actor in any case. He will be missed.

I attended my first Flatlanders Festival last weekend. What a great event! Huge crowds, daylong events, what more could you ask for?

I know from attending city and county meetings that the Flatlanders Committee has been in asking for financial help, which was granted (grudgingly in some cases). But what they really need is more committee members. They are low on manpower and need some fresh folks to help out.

In spite of that I enjoyed seeing all the out of town folks come in. If only we could have two or three such events, though this year we did, since we had the only fireworks show in the region.

I've been told by several people that Main Street used to be the place to be on Saturday nights, that ever Saturday looked like Flatlanders. Its a shame that's no longer the case. It means we have to work hard to bring local residents out of their homes and people in from surrounding areas. We should do all we can to make sure Flatlanders and all our other community events keep happening. Otherwise the future of our town won't look so bright.

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