

2015 Arizona Flood Risk Symposium

In February of this year, the Arizona Floodplain Management Association (AFMA), in coordination with the national Association of State Floodplain Managers (ASFPM) Foundation, hosted a one day symposium at the Allen Readiness Center in Phoenix to discuss the many concerns about flooding in Arizona.

Our goal was to assemble a diverse group of individuals who would contribute toward productive discussions and potential solutions. Invitees included community staff responsible for managing floodplains within their cities and towns, emergency managers, scientists from the meteorology, engineering, geology and water resources fields, representatives from real estate and insurance, and elected officials who are expected to fully comprehend the flooding issues in their communities. Media and outreach specialists who can craft clear and concise messages for the public, and representatives from FEMA were also invited.



2015 Arizona Flood Risk Symposium Attendees

The purpose of the symposium was not only to generate ideas and solutions from within our group of professionals and jurisdiction representatives but also to understand and include the many challenges and multi-faceted interests of all other potential stakeholders as well. Only by working in serious partnerships with all stakeholders do we stand a chance of being successful in managing our floodplains effectively.

Our four plenary speakers touched on this critical need for partnerships throughout their presentations.

Beth Zimmerman, FEMA Headquarters, spoke of the necessity for not only resilience but planning for what takes place after an event. That kind of planning requires not only a multi-jurisdictional approach, which we are accustomed to, but a multi-faceted approach that brings varied groups to the table such as the real estate and development community, utility stakeholders and environmental sustainability groups.

Bill Wiley of Maricopa County touched on the need to develop partnerships that we may not have considered in the past and to search creatively for solutions that will stand the test of time. As Bill pointed out, our future challenges are likely to be a combination of increased population/urban growth, less precipitation but possibly higher intensity storms and, as always, limited resources. He stressed that our keys for success lie in planning for this “new reality,” engaging in proactive maintenance, leveraging technology, using outreach and partnerships and exploring multi-use opportunities.

In the next presentation, Beyond the Special Flood Hazard Area, Jon Fuller did a skillful job of illustrating the fact that we cannot consider floodplain management from a singular cause and effect. He made a strong case for FEMA and our arid western communities to actively map and regulate the serious riverine erosion hazards that many of us have already experienced in our communities. Jon also pointed out the potential impact that future development will have on our watersheds and the ever changing regulatory framework that we work within, such as the recent Executive Order 13690 (Jan 2015) and the impact that these changes may have on how we approach

floodplain management. He summarized with the very real risks of subsidence, wildfires and debris flows and their subsequent effects on floodplain management.

Daniel Henz, Maricopa County, gave us a recap of the historic rainfall events of the 2014 monsoon season during which the Phoenix metro area experienced rainfall intensities and totals that eclipsed previous records. Dan stopped short of making any predictions but made it clear that we could be experiencing a new normal and the ways in which we prepare for the future are critical to our communities.

In summary, it is clear that as the professionals who are considered “experts” in this field, we need to continue to reach outside of our comfort zone and have sustainable floodplain management conversations with a very diverse group of stakeholders to achieve the goal of protecting our communities from flood related risk. As you are going about your work day, take a moment to think about collaboration, partnering and sharing resources. Who can you work with? How can you make sure that all stakeholders are being supported? In addition to your projects and programs being successful, how can you develop a program to enhance and showcase other community interests as well?

ASFPM Symposia Background

The Association of State Floodplain Managers (ASFPM) Foundation has a strong presence in national discussions about flood risk. Over the past decade, the Foundation has sponsored four “Gilbert F. White National Flood Policy Forums,” in which groups of 100 national and international experts and leaders convened in Washington, D.C.

The National Flood Policy Forums have focused on reducing flood losses, managing flood risks and floodplain resources, and the future of floodplain management. The goal of each forum was to facilitate discussion on flood risk, establish priorities for improving policy and program implementation, and to formulate recommendations and directions for the future.

Based on the success of the national forums, the Foundation began promoting similar meetings at the state level. Over the past few years, Flood Risk Symposia have been held in Colorado, Florida, Georgia, and Texas. Arizona and Illinois were selected to host the symposia in 2015. In addition to productive discussions, there is a strong emphasis on proposed action items and how to measure progress in flood risk management at the community level.