

2016 New York State Flood Risk Symposium

In April 2016, the New York State Floodplain and Stormwater Managers Association (NYSFSMA), in coordination with the national Association of State Floodplain Managers (ASFPM) Foundation, hosted a one day Symposium at the Henry A. Wallace Visitor and Education Center at the FDR Presidential Library and Home in Hyde Park, NY, to discuss the many concerns about flooding and climate change impacts in New York.

Recent destruction caused by tropical systems Sandy, Irene, and Lee, as well as more localized storms, have heightened concern throughout the state about flood risk and the effects of climate change on future flood risk. In 2014, in response to the recent extreme flooding in much of New York State, Governor Andrew Cuomo signed the Community Risk and Resiliency Act, whose purpose is to ensure that certain state monies, facility-siting regulations, and permits consider the effects of climate risk and extreme-weather events. Several working groups are currently developing guidance under the Act.

Our goal was to assemble a diverse group of individuals who will contribute toward productive discussions and potential solutions. Invitees include community staff responsible for managing floodplains within their communities, emergency managers, scientists, members of the engineering, business and environmental communities, and local elected officials who comprehend the flooding issues in their communities. We have also invited representatives from state and federal agencies, including FEMA, which administers the National Flood Insurance Program.



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 on issues very pertinent to New York throughout their presentations.

Adam Sobel, Professor, Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory and School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, presented "How Rare was Sandy?," speaking to the frequency and elevation of extreme coastal flooding in New York City and surrounding tidal areas.

Arthur T. DeGaetano, Director, Northeast Regional Climate Center at Cornell University, presented "The 100-year Storm: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow" which touched on projected changes to 1-day 100 year rainfall events based on three greenhouse gas emissions scenarios.

In the next presentation, "Community Risk and Resiliency Act: Mainstreaming Climate Change", Mark Lowery, of the Office of Climate Change, NYSDEC, addressed the New York State Community Risk and Resiliency Act that requires the state to pass a regulation projecting sea level rise, and adds "consideration of sea-level rise, storm surge and flooding" to a number of state regulatory and funding programs.

Bill Nechamen, Chief of the Floodplain Management Section, NYSDEC, provided the attendees with a background on draft proposals for a New York State Flood Risk Management Standard as guidance for the Community Risk and Resiliency Act's requirement for consideration of sea-level rise, storm surge and flooding.

The final plenary speaker, Janet Thigpen of the Southern Tier Central Regional Planning and Development Board, and a member of the ASFPM Board of Directors, presented a history and current status of national flood risk policy and procedures from the 19th century to now including an overview of the new Federal Flood Risk Management Standard.

Following the plenary presentations, the Symposia attendees were broken up into three groups, that were then led by facilitators from the Foundation and group reporters and scribes from the Chapter, who helped lead discussions on the following three breakout group topics, along with a common topic for all three groups –

- What are the anticipated future changes to flood hazards, and to what extent can projections be used to inform land use and development decisions?
- What is the appropriate protection standard for future floodplain development (not necessarily limited to currently mapped floodplains)?
- What strategies can be implemented to promote flood resilient land use practices that protect development and enhance the beneficial flood mitigation functions of natural systems?
- Common topic – How can participation and collaboration with public and private partners be enhanced so that all stakeholders are working toward a common goal of protecting communities from flood risks?

These three breakout groups were then given the opportunity to convene as a large group in the afternoon, and provide group report-outs to all attendees. This was beneficial in allowing visibility to and input from all groups on all topics. The outcomes of these discussions will be captured in a final New York State Flood Risk Symposia Report, along with actionable goals to achieve in continuing the dialogues and outcomes.

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 State Flood Risk 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 five “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, the future of floodplain management, holistic coast approaches, and addressing new Federal standards and requirements. 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, in 2011 the Foundation began promoting similar meetings at the state level. Since 2011, Flood Risk Symposia have been held in Colorado, Indiana, Texas, Georgia, Florida, Illinois, and Arizona. For 2016, New York, Texas (for a 2nd time), and North Carolina were selected to host these State Flood Risk Symposia. 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.