

To Our Friends and Associates

A good portion of 2009 was occupied with the efforts to insure that the US Geological Survey's (USGS) gauging network would continue to be operated at a level that would support the current flood forecast and warning system. The announced shortfall from 2008 was averted and funding, at least through Federal Fiscal Year 2010, would be sufficient to continue the system. Stay tuned as the budgeting process for 2011 begins in earnest early 2010. Much time and energy was put into organizing a "Cooperators" group intended to develop a system that would assure the funding for the system. There were some successes with this approach with greater visibility for the network and the value provided. However I'm not convinced any institutional changes were made that will insure the 2011 budget process won't have the potential to lose these same gauges all over again.

However a more sinister issue is quietly looming just over the horizon that could have a more profound impact on the region as a whole. There is a proposed FEMA Flood Map modernization effort that is slowly rolling out. This effort has been moving through the North Branch of the Susquehanna Basin, particularly Broome County, and is expected to be done in Chemung County in the very near future. This effort bears watching.

At first consideration, the updating of the Flood Maps sounds like a tremendous accomplishment. These maps are very old, many having been last reviewed in the 70's. These maps are the basis for determining the requirements for purchasing Flood Insurance from FEMA for mortgages if the property happens to be located in the flood hazard area. If any part of the property being considered for a mortgage touches the flood hazard area, flood insurance is required. Mortgage companies depend on contractors designated by FEMA to provide the map determinations. These contractors are typically located in Texas or other locations. When making their determinations, they have no idea of the local area and topography other than what is shown on the flood maps. The problem lies in the fact that the survey information was not very accurate at the time the maps were created. In addition, there is no provision for taking into account any floodway improvements that have been made over the years. In the Chemung Basin alone, many changes have been made in the last 30 years through roadway development and mitigation efforts. However none of this is reflected in our current maps.

So it would seem that the best course of action would be to get FEMA into the area as soon as possible to get these old maps updated. A great deal of effort has been done over the last several years to get on the magic list that would allocate federal funding to the area for the map modernization. Unfortunately, in government there is always a good news, bad news scenario. The bad news is that Broome County, and with it the North Branch of the Susquehanna, were put on the list for mapping updates first. This also turned out to be the good news as well. It gave a chance to see how FEMA, or should we say their contractors were to approach the process. As they began developing map updates it became apparent they were not taking into consideration new improvements in the flood management system. They were also considering the elimination of the flood protection provided by levee systems built 50 years ago. The levees had been accounted for in the previous flood maps. The troubling part of the process was that the maps were

mostly complete before anyone was able to see them. There was no local input, no planning groups, no provision for state and local agencies to make suggestions until the maps were rolled out to public meetings. As of the end of 2009, there was still considerable discussion in the Broome County area as to how many more structures would be added to the flood hazard area of the maps. During the 2006 flooding in Broome, the City of Binghamton was saved considerable damage by the levees that exist throughout the city. The new maps may remove the levees protection from the flood maps and require the entire City of Binghamton to be covered by flood insurance. The end result will be millions of dollars of flood insurance premiums required by every structure that would now be in the flood hazard area.

The message here is to keep a watchful eye on this process. The impact of the flood mapping changes by FEMA could be the most significant threat to our flood plains in recent memory. The cost of adding properties, currently shown as out of the flood plain, could be in the hundreds of thousand dollars per year combined. Chemung County was next on the list for flood mapping updating. The process was just beginning locally and Chemung County is asking the right questions. The problem is that there are few answers from FEMA as to where the process stands. If Broome County is any indication, this could be bad news rather than good. The jury is still out in Broome as to whether FEMA and their contractors will be receptive to the changes being proposed. Late in the year it looked as though there would be no changes to the proposed mapping and that an appeal would have to be made from the Broome County area to challenge the results with engineers hired locally. This would be a huge waste of time and money by FEMA, the local communities, and ultimately the taxpayers.

The irony with the flood mapping issue is that this area has put a heavy emphasis on mitigation of the flood threat, as well as advanced warning, in order to cut down on the flood losses and the cost to the public. Our mission here at EES is to provide redundant river and stream gauges in order limit the flood threat to our communities. We strive to make this area a safer place to live and work. Over the past couple years we have been successful in adding 3 new stream gauges for better coordination during high-water events. Time and again, the years have proven that the founders of this organization had tremendous vision when they created our “self-help” flood warning organization.

The success of an organization is wholly dependant on those people that work behind the scenes to keep it going. EES is no different. We are blessed with a group of volunteers that continue to give of their time and talents. I need to recognize the members of our flood warning group that meet monthly in order to keep up to speed on flood operations and the changes in technology that we continue to throw at them. Also, our CHIT volunteers, that participate in training and work at exercises to keep their expertise at the ready in case of a hazardous materials incident. Hats off to the maintenance team that keep the gauges and the computers running to the high levels of performance we have come to expect. And last, but surely not least, my management team, Joy Brewer, Scott Rodebaugh and Janet Thigpen, 3 people that keep this organization running on an everyday basis. Genuine thanks to all.

Michael Sprague, President