

# FLOOD CURRENT



## Improved Training Required to Assist Local Floodplain Officials

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There is nothing quite like a flood to demonstrate that many local floodplain administrators are not familiar enough with their ordinances, requirements of the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) or disaster relief to provide timely response during crisis and recovery periods. Unless they are adequately trained, they or their superiors (usually elected officials) often believe the state and/or Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) will come in and save the day with little responsibility on the part of the local government.

A case in point is the flash flooding which ravaged several southwest Oklahoma communities in October. As the waters were receding, I found myself in one of those communities, briefing the mayor of the Town of Apache (an insurance agent), Caddo County commissioners and other impacted local officials. They were shocked when I explained that their residents should not proceed with any flood repairs or move back into their homes until damage reports were completed. Unfortunately, this flood caught them largely unaware of the requirements and responsibilities they vowed to uphold. Still, after several intense meetings and discussions, I tip my hat to the local Caddo County and Apache officials for efficiently enforcing their NFIP ordinance, both before and after the floods which devastated the area.

Well-trained floodplain officials are intimately familiar with local ordinances, substantial damage provisions, specifics concerning Increased Cost of Compliance coverage, how state or federal aid is intertwined with flood insurance and the importance of annual local floodplain management workshops. The time for training is before the flood. Bringing the public and local officials up to speed on pertinent floodplain management and disaster regulations on the heels of a flooding event is tough — tough on emergency management, tough on elected officials, tough on citizens and tough on the NFIP. The best way to break the cycle of repeated flooding is through enforcement of substantial damage provisions, something many floodplain administrators know little about.

Training is the key. While Oklahoma has 363 communities enrolled in the NFIP, only 80 local floodplain officials are certified to manage those individual programs. Floodplain management is a full-time job, definitely not a responsibility assigned as an afterthought to an untrained city/town official or employee.

The Association of State Floodplain Managers, Oklahoma Floodplain Managers Association, and other organizations offer voluntary certification programs, including testing requirements concerning the many, varied aspects of floodplain management. These certification programs are critical to the success of local floodplain management. They must be supported and fostered.

But more should be done. Training requirements for local staff would ensure more effective administration of local ordinances and FEMA should consider certification of the local floodplain administrator as a prerequisite to community participation in the NFIP. All local floodplain administrators, including certified ones, should attend periodic training on the NFIP and related elements of emergency management and assistance, particularly the constantly changing federal requirements described in Title 44 of the Code of Federal Regulations. The OFMA and ASFPM have continuing education requirements for their voluntary certification programs. A combination of further incentives and requirements — again, perhaps in conjunction with NFIP participation — should be explored so that local administrators, once trained and/or certified, remain up to speed on the latest floodplain management techniques and regulations. We should explore the potential integration of floodplain management curriculum at the university level and, on a related note, the ASFPM has held preliminary discussions with the Emergency Management Institute about developing an “Introduction to Floodplain Management” course and identifying other partners for such an effort.

In summary, in Oklahoma and elsewhere, we desperately need a comprehensive program for training, educating and certifying floodplain managers, both at the state and local levels and as an option for college students who are interested in the field. To be effective, these training and educational opportunities must be interwoven with appropriate incentives and requirements that will ensure that the right people have the right tools to deal with flooding events.

# October Floods Devastate Central, Southern Oklahoma Communities

*(Thanks to the Associated Press, Apache News and Federal Emergency Management Agency for portions of the following story.)*

Early Sunday morning, October 22, one of the worst floods ever to hit Apache, Oklahoma, southwest of Oklahoma City, destroyed numerous homes, washed out highways and roads, displaced dozens of families and prompted several citizens to seek the shelter of a sturdy tree in their effort to escape the wrath of rapidly rising floodwaters.

Prayers for relief from Oklahoma's severe drought situation turned to curses as thunderstorms dumped up to 15 inches of rain on some areas of already soggy south-



*Flooding in the Josseyville housing addition, south of Apache, as the floodwaters were receding during the morning of October 24.*

ern Oklahoma. Fifty homes in Apache were destroyed, along with 20 in nearby Anadarko. At least 200 residents were evacuated and the damage was enough to drive some victims away permanently.

"My parents can't afford flood insurance. They live on a fixed income," Debra Love said. "This is our third flood, and our last. We're leaving."

As many as 60 roads and bridges were damaged in the Anadarko area after 16 inches of rain fell in six days. Floodwaters rose as high as seven feet in some houses before receding.

In Carter County, about 80 miles southeast, swollen creeks flooded highways with up to three feet of water and carried away cars. "People just don't listen. You tell them not to drive through the damn water, and what do they do? They drive through the damn water," said Ed Reed, the county's emergency manager. Almost one-half of flood-related deaths occur in vehicles, primarily when people drive into flooded

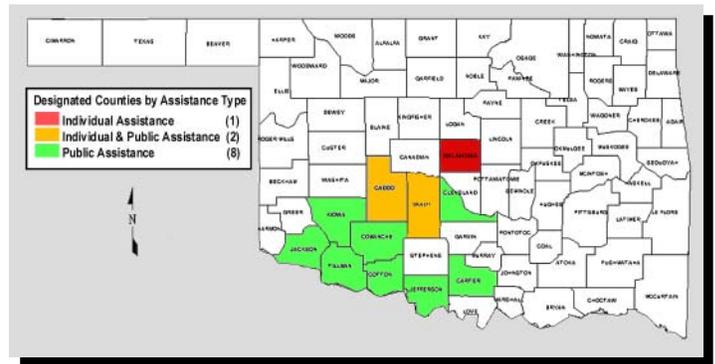
highway dips or low-drainage areas at night.

Ardmore, the Carter County seat, received 3.2 inches of rain on Thursday, October 26 after averaging more than one inch per day for the previous week. Highways in Carter, Jefferson and Stephens counties were temporarily closed due to the high waters. Near Chickasha, hit hard by the Sunday/Monday storms, a water main broke, seriously jeopardizing the city's water service. The National Guard and state emergency management officials tanked in water as a precaution, and schools and factories closed to help ease the water load. Chickasha received an estimated \$1 million in flood damages.

In late November, the Federal Emergency Management Agency made federal disaster aid available to stricken residents and business owners in Caddo and Grady Counties. The assistance was authorized under a major disaster declaration issued for the state by President Clinton. The declaration covered damage to private and public property from the storms and flooding that occurred over the period of October 21-29. Specifically, individual and public assistance is available to residents of Caddo and Grady Counties; public assistance only in McClain, Carter, Jefferson, Cotton, Comanche, Kiowa, Tillman and Jackson Counties; and individual assistance only in Oklahoma County.

The assistance, coordinated by FEMA, can include grants to help pay for temporary housing, minor home repairs and other serious disaster-related expenses. Low-interest loans from the U.S. Small Business Administration will also be available to cover residential and business losses not fully compensated by insurance.

In addition, federal funds will be provided to affected local governments to pay 75 percent of the eligible cost for repairing or replacing damaged public facilities in Caddo, Carter, Comanche, Cotton, Grady, Jefferson, Kiowa, McClain and Tillman Counties. The declaration also made cost-shared funding available to Oklahoma for approved projects that reduce future disaster risks. Additional designations may be made later if requested by the state and warranted by the results of additional damage assessments. The damage assistance application period runs through January 26.



*Counties eligible for various federal assistance as a result of flooding which occurred in Oklahoma from October 21-29. (Map courtesy Federal Emergency Management Agency.)*