

THE FLOOD CURRENT

Floods Point Out Driving Dangers, Futility of Damage/Repair Cycle

Ken Morris, Oklahoma NFIP Coordinator

Once again, on the heels of fierce drought conditions, Oklahoma has been struck by severe flooding after the Chikaskia and Salt Fork Rivers spilled over their banks in early November. One life, that of a young Aline woman, has already been lost after driving into always dangerous and deceptive floodwaters. Although homes and businesses were impacted in Alfalfa, Grant, Tulsa, Creek and Ottawa Counties, Kay County, especially the Towns of Blackwell and

Jefferson, suffered the most severe damage. As mentioned elsewhere in this issue of the Flood Current, I traveled to Blackwell on November 2 to tour flood-damaged homes. After meeting with local and county officials at the Red Cross Center and Emergency Operations Center, we experienced firsthand what a devastating impact flooding can have on both possessions and lives.

Representatives of the Cherokee Strip Red Cross, Kay County Emergency

Management and the Town of Blackwell were instrumental in assisting hundreds of flood victims, from evacuation to providing temporary shelter and other personal items. In the wake of this disaster, many victims have pledged to stop future flood damage here and break the damage/repair cycle that continually drains communities and state governments of available funds and services.

On another note, it's time for all certified floodplain managers in Oklahoma to renew their certification, which expires each fall after the Oklahoma Floodplain Management Annual (OFMA) Conference. This year's conference, held September 16-17, was one of the best ever. Also, keep your eyes open for The BFE, OFMA's newsletter, which will contain the Certified Floodplain Managers renewal form. Please complete and return it to the OFMA in Tulsa, along with the \$10 renewal fee. For more information about the renewal procedure, contact Joe Remondini at (918) 669-7198. □

Officials Visit to Assess Damage in Blackwell, Seek Federal Aid

On November 6, a team of federal and state officials, including Oklahoma Water Resources Board representatives, assessed damages as Kay County citizens sifted through the muck and destruction left in the wake of devastating floods which inundated the town five days earlier.

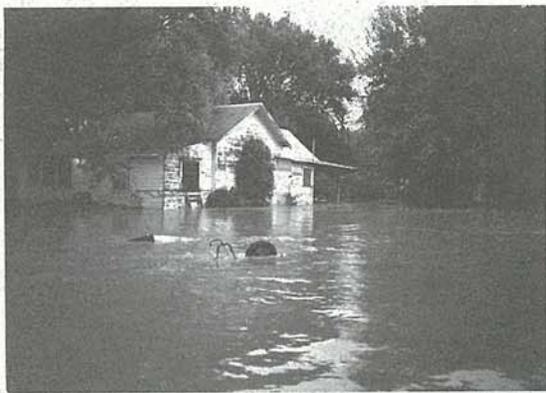
The survey of flooded homes in Blackwell and other hard-hit areas of Kay County was conducted by specialists from the OWRB, Oklahoma Department of Civil Emergency Management, FEMA and U.S. Small Business Administration. The agencies seek to determine the nature and amount of uninsured losses and needs of affected communities in Kay, Alfalfa and Grant Counties, where the Chikaskia and Salt Fork Rivers overran their banks and inundated more than 100 homes and businesses.

Governor Keating has declared disaster emergencies in those areas. FEMA and SBA officials will analyze gathered information to determine if a federal disaster declaration is warranted.

According to Ken Morris, OWRB coordinator of the National Flood Insurance Program in Oklahoma, those impacted, including the 160 evacuated in Blackwell, will feel the brunt of the disaster for years to come.

"It's one thing to witness firsthand the impact that flooding of this magnitude can have on physical structures, homes and businesses. But it really hits home when you see the personal damage inflicted, the impact on families and livelihoods," he said. On November 2, Morris assisted ODCEM staff in a preliminary damage assessment conducted, in some areas, through the use of small water craft.

The preliminary survey identified two homes completely destroyed, eight homes suffering major damage, 36 homes with minor damage and an additional 300 homes "affected" (flooded basements, wet floors, etc.) by flooding in the three-county region. "Many of the those most severely impacted do not have flood insurance," Morris said..



In Blackwell, 160 homes were evacuated, two completely destroyed and 300 "affected" by floodwaters.

Estimating preliminary damage in some flooded areas of Kay, Alfalfa and Grant Counties was possible only by boat.



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"For those who have no alternative to living in the floodplain, flood insurance is critically important; it's affordable and easy to get," he emphasized. "It seems like such an easy choice, especially when you see what hardships flooding can inflict on a home and its residents. It appears that damage in Kay, Alfalfa and Grant Counties will be insufficient to qualify for federal aid specifically for individuals and/or families," he said.

He pointed out that federal and state disaster agencies are implementing strategies, such as buy-outs and other incentives, to permanently remove citizens from the floodplain.

"Our goal is to break the repeated cycle of damage and repair and, instead, restore floodplains and allow them to fulfill their natural purpose – the safe conveyance of floodwaters," Morris said. □

OWRB Partners with Tulsa In Project Impact

A ceremony held at Tulsa's Gilcrease Museum November 4 recognized Tulsa as the Oklahoma Project Impact Community for 1998. James Lee Witt, Federal Emergency Management Agency director, presented the award to Mayor Susan Savage and noted that Tulsa is a model community in floodplain management activities.

Witt emphasized that now is the time for Tulsa to move toward the next level to become resistant to disasters associated with earthquakes, tornados, wildfires and floods. Project Impact challenges communities across the nation to build local partnerships, assess vulnerabilities to natural hazards and implement actions that protect lives and property by prepar-

The OWRB will sponsor a week-long training course January 11-15 for state floodplain managers. According to Ken Morris, state NFIP coordinator, the course is entitled "Managing Floodplain Development through the National Flood Insurance Program."

Morris pointed out this is the same course previously offered only at FEMA headquarters in Emmitsburg, Maryland. He said the expense of sending Oklahomans so far had restricted the number of state floodplain managers who could attend.

The course will be held at the Center for Continuing Education on the University of Oklahoma campus in Norman, with the first session underway Monday, January 11 at 1:30

ing for and reducing effects of natural disasters.

The ceremony distinguished Tulsa as a Project Impact Community and delivered mitigation funding from FEMA.

Ken Morris, state NFIP coordinator, received a "Tulsa Partners" certificate recognizing the assistance lent by the OWRB in floodproofing the city.

"This country spends \$2.5 billion each year in damage response and recovery," Witt said. "It makes sense to spend one mitigation dollar before the disaster to save \$100 in damages later."

Mayor Savage pointed out that the Project Impact designation represents the proactive approach to disaster

p.m. Morris encouraged early enrollment because the class size will be limited to 36. Instructors will be federal, state and local officials.

Lodging at the Sooner Hotel, adjacent to the Center for Continuing Education, is free to course participants and continental breakfast is provided. Morris emphasized that although there is no lodging charge, it is important to call the Sooner Hotel at 405-329-2270 to make reservations. Participants may bring spouses, but lodging expenses will be billed.

Participants may purchase other meals at the nearby Couch Cafeteria. For more information, call Ken Morris, NFIP coordinator, or Pat Kirkpatrick at 405-530-8800. □

preparedness that's been present in the city for more than 15 years. It was Tulsa's Memorial Day Flood of 1984 that mobilized Tulsa citizens. According to Savage, the disaster killed 14 people, injured 280. The flood damaged 6,800 structures and 700 vehicles, and losses totaled \$183 million for the city.

Before that storm, Tulsa had endured 75 years of flooding and other weather-related disasters.

"People had grown to accept flooding as a way of life, until the Memorial Day flood changed the attitude and course of events for the city," said Savage. She pointed out that voter-approved utility fee increases allowed the buyout of structures along the Arkansas River floodway and conversion of the land to parks and other uses that did not involve structures.

FEMA's Project Impact initiative goes beyond celebrating specific mitigation measures, said Albert Ashwood, director of the Oklahoma Department of Civil Emergency Management. "Mitigation is not a new idea. It is an effort that requires community-wide effort. It's a public safety issue and also an economic development issue," Ashwood declared. □

Members of the Oklahoma Floodplain Management Association presented FEMA Director James Lee Witt with an OFMA briefcase when he visited Tulsa early in November.

Left to right: Fred Liebe, Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management, Paul Zachary, City of Tulsa Floodplain Administrator and OFMA chair; Ken Morris, Water Resources Board; James Lee Witt, Gavin Brady, OWRB Tulsa Field Office manager.

