

Forum on Risk Management and Assessments of Natural Hazards

Opening Remarks by Ms. Margaret Lawless,

Chairperson of the Subcommittee for Natural Disaster Reduction and Acting
Executive Associate Director for Mitigation, Federal Emergency

Management Agency (FEMA); Monday, February 5, 2001

(with Sam Williamson, Federal Coordinator for Meteorology)

- During the 1990's, the global community has seen a paradigm shift in emergency management. While continuing to streamline and improve response and recovery operations, we have increasingly embraced the importance of mitigation as a means of reducing disaster losses. This forum is, in fact, a testament to how far we have come in recognizing that the foundation of mitigation is risk assessment.
- The time has come to make a National Multi-Hazard Risk Assessment a reality. Through our discussions over the next two days we will hear about the tools currently available, we will learn what different agencies are currently doing in this area, and we will identify specific actions for how we can come together as the Federal government to accomplish this critical need.
- From FEMA, you will hear about our progress with expanding the HAZUS (Hazard US) loss-estimation model to encompass the earthquake, flood, and wind hazards. Incorporating data on:
 - infrastructure,
 - building inventory,
 - geology,
 - damage estimation formulas, and
 - critical operating center locations,

HAZUS estimates structural damage and forecasts casualties. You will also hear an update on our flood map modernization efforts.

- But we have to be mindful that having the tools is not the ultimate goal. Scientific research, forecasting, modeling, warning systems are only valuable when they are applied, when they are put into practice.
- With HAZUS, this has already begun. In the last 3-4 years since the HAZUS earthquake module was released, we have already seen widespread use in the public and private sectors.
 - Charles Schwab has used HAZUS for business continuity planning;
 - The State of California has used it to develop its own statewide earthquake risk assessment;
 - Users groups have formed, such as the Bay Area HAZUS Users Group, which brings together nearly 100 public and private sector organizations to focus on planning, coordinating, and disaster response protocols. Their website address is HAZUS.org. Southern California is also in the process of forming a HAZUS users group, and
 - Senator Feinstein used HAZUS earthquake risk assessment in the legislative process to identify the level of risk for particular communities in proposing financial incentives for earthquake mitigation actions.

- Following this focus on implementation, we will hear updates on FEMA’s Project Impact initiative and its corollary, Disaster Resistant Universities. From the beginning, in 1997, Project Impact has emphasized the importance of risk assessment as the starting point for creating disaster resistant communities. With its advocacy of:

an interrelated process incorporating risk assessment,
local level involvement,
private sector partnerships, and
a long-term investment in prevention measures,

Project Impact has radically changed how communities nationwide approach reducing disaster losses.

- Developing a national multi-hazard risk assessment is fundamental to making our nation safer from disasters. The Congress has also recognized this. In October 2000, Congress passed the Disaster Mitigation Act to amend FEMA’s authorizing legislation, the Stafford Act.
- In addition to authorizing a pre-disaster mitigation program and increasing funding for post-disaster mitigation contingent on pre-disaster planning, the Congress has asked FEMA to pilot the generation of multi-hazard advisory maps, defined as “a map on which data concerning each type of natural disaster is identified simultaneously for the purpose of showing areas of overlap” in a minimum of 5 states. This is a clear endorsement of the course we have already charted.

- As we proceed towards a national multi-hazard risk assessment, we must come together to share our strengths, to leverage each other's work. Congress recognizes the contributions of agencies across the Federal government and used the Disaster Mitigation Act to create an Interagency Task Force to coordinate “the implementation of pre-disaster hazard mitigation programs administered by the Federal Government.”
- While this particular task force may be new, our working relationships are not. The Office of the Federal Coordinator for Meteorology has, of course, been serving to collaborate across agencies for many years. In addition, the Subcommittee on Natural Disaster Reduction (SNDR) includes membership of nearly 20 agencies, many of which are attending this forum.
- Reflecting a greater emphasis on applied research and implementation, the mission of the SNDR has been modified over time to include both developing the necessary scientific information and applicable tools AND to focus on applying these tools. In fact, the very name of the Subcommittee has evolved, from the Subcommittee on Disaster *Research* to Disaster *Reduction*.
- Recent activities of the SNDR include:
 - “Effective Disaster Warning Systems”, a November 2000 report on public and private sector R&D capability to provide early warning of natural or technological hazards that threaten the safety of the Nation. This has been posted on the CENR and the SNDR web page.

- Public-Private Partnership 2000, a series of 14 forums held from September 1997 through 1999 to identify new and innovative opportunities for government and nonprofit, private sector organizations to work together to reduce vulnerability to and losses from natural hazards in communities throughout the Nation. A final draft report has been completed and is in concurrence for publication.

As an outgrowth of PPP-2000, Congress created the Natural Hazards Caucus. Co-chaired by Senator Ted Stevens (R-AK) and Senator John Edwards (D-NC), this Caucus seeks to educate Members and staff about the costs of natural disasters to their districts and states, and the benefits their constituents will realize through greater efforts to understand, prevent, and mitigate natural disasters.

- A work group on Remote Sensing Applications, co-chaired by USGS and NOAA/NESDIS (National Environmental Satellite, Data, and Information Service) to study how data from current and planned Earth Observation satellites can be employed more effectively to mitigate losses from disasters.
- This Forum is an excellent opportunity for us to come together as the Federal Government to move from thought to action, from concept to application, to make the national multi-hazard risk assessment a reality.