

## EPA Releases "Watershed Central" Web Site and a "Watershed Wiki"

EPA recently posted a new Web site called "Watershed Central" to help watershed organizations and others find key information they need to implement watershed management projects. The primary purpose of the new Watershed Central Web site is to make it easy for organizations to find the information that they need in a timely manner to help protect and restore their water resources. Watershed Central helps users find environmental data, watershed models, nearby local organizations, and guidance documents -- and other information depending on the task at hand. Watershed Central also contains links to watershed technical resources, funding sources, mapping applications and information specific to named watersheds. The site includes a "Watershed Central Wiki" that users may use to collaborate and share information. We encourage all watershed practitioners to use this new Watershed Wiki to share tools, scientific findings, expertise, and local approaches to watershed management. Watershed Central not only links to EPA Web resources but also links to other valuable funding, guidance and tools on Web sites of state, tribal, and federal partners, universities, and nonprofit organizations. EPA's new site is located at: [www.epa.gov/watershedcentral](http://www.epa.gov/watershedcentral)

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Submit your own items or suggestions for future topics to column editor Rebecca Quinn, CFM, at [rcquinn@earthlink.net](mailto:rcquinn@earthlink.net). Comments welcomed!

### Here's Something You Might Find Interesting . . .

In the last issue I ran a list of questions and issues and several readers answered my call to let me know which topics they'd like to see addressed. I'll get to the list in future columns. This time, however, I'll take a somewhat bigger picture look.

If you're as busy as the rest of us, you probably haven't found the time to plow through the several reports that make up the NFIP Evaluation Reports. Thirteen reports were released between 2001 and 2006. Not surprisingly, the findings and recommendations have started to influence our floodplain management activities.

Two of the NFIP Evaluation Reports contain the same statement: "The success of the NFIP depends on communities ensuring that buildings and other development within their jurisdictions are constructed and maintained according to these standards so that flood losses will be minimized." This same statement also appears in FEMA's FY09 guidance for the Community Assistance Program through which funding is provided to states to "provide technical assistance to NFIP communities and to evaluate community performance."

Since my early days as Maryland's NFIP State Coordinator (mid-80s!) I've been a big believer in the value of Community Assistance Visits. Nothing beats getting to know community officials in person and seeing what they face on a daily basis. I'll bet that every state employee and FEMA staffer who has conducted CAVs will tell you the same thing: every visit is a great opportunity to sort out the many misunderstandings of the basic requirements of the NFIP.

The FY09 CAP guidance goes on to highlight a finding of the NFIP Evaluation Report, An Evaluation of Compliance with the National Flood Insurance Program Part B: Are Minimum Building Requirements

Being Met? The field inspections and surveys of a sample of post-FIRM buildings in communities across the country indicate that we're getting the Lowest Floor elevated to or above the Base Flood Elevation most of the time. Many of us have spent our careers working toward this result, and I was greatly encouraged to see it confirmed by research. More recently, I've heard that the majority of post-FIRM buildings insured by the NFIP are rated as having their lowest floors above the BFE.

However, that same NFIP Evaluation Report also points out that we've been missing some of the other details that go into making buildings compliant. Specifically, just over half of the "violations" identified involved noncompliant mechanical/utility equipment and flood openings.

FEMA recently issued revised Technical Bulletin, TB-1, Openings in Foundation Walls and Walls of Enclosures Below Elevated Buildings in Special Flood Hazard Areas (see announcement in the September issue of *News & Views*). My suggestion for state folks and community officials is to download this bulletin and read it. Read it before you issue the next permit for an enclosure, crawlspace, or accessory structure in any A Zone. And definitely read it before your next CAV because FEMA expects greater attention to be focused on enclosures during these visits.

There's another factor at play when it comes to enclosures and flood openings that should prompt closer attention to these aspects of compliant buildings. The Write-Your-Own companies and underwriters are starting to pay more attention to enclosures. I expect this also is a direct result of the NFIP Evaluation Report. In particular, now that Elevation Certificates include photographs, they're paying attention to flood openings – the number, net open area, and height above grade (see the revised TB-1 for guidance on these aspects of openings) and whether acceptable documentation is provided if engineered openings are installed (individual certification prepared for the building or an Evaluation Report issued by the ICC Evaluation Service).

Local officials may be aware that insurance agents and underwriters are looking at enclosures. Many owners are seeing a significant increase in their premium costs and it might be a direct result of having a noncompliant enclosure. Owners might call the building department for advice on retrofitting to bring the enclosure into compliance.

Keep this in mind when you get complaints of cost increases, the increases might be a direct result of noncompliant enclosures. Also keep in mind that sometimes the fix is easy – not enough openings? Install more. Finished materials in that foyer? Remove or replace with flood damage-resistant materials. Water heater on the floor? Raise it on a platform.

There's something rather cool that we're spending less of our time struggling to get people to accept that buildings have to be elevated – and now can focus on some of these finer points of compliance.

Now, back to the notion that the success of the NFIP depends on communities ensuring that buildings are in compliance with the minimum requirements. This reinforces the importance of technical assistance, whether delivered through telephone/email consultations, training courses, workshops, manuals, Quick Guides, or CAVs and Community Assistance Contacts (CACs). It comes as no surprise that I believe that nothing beats the CAV (although I expect there are some local floodplain managers who might take exception to that statement!).

One of the biggest variables between state programs is the frequency of community visits. Ideally, communities with active development in their floodplains should be visited every few years. My experience in Maryland suggests that frequent visits not only made sure that community officials knew who to call, it helped them resist pressures to "soften" the requirements. I recall a number of times when

a community's floodplain manager asked me to write "one of those letters" cautioning about the importance of strictly administering the ordinance.

Now, I know that my experience is based in Maryland which is one of the smaller states – just 133 NFIP-participating communities (23 counties, Baltimore City, and 109 incorporated municipalities). And I know that many states have large numbers of communities and it's not feasible to do CAVs every few years (I believe Pennsylvania tops the chart with nearly 2,500 communities!). Still, life would be boring if it was easy, right?

Anyway, thanks in large part to FEMA being able to increase the CAP funding levels, over the past several years many states have been able to expand their programs and staffs. When you consider where this profession was 30 years ago, we've come a long way. Yes, there are challenges and there will always be challenges. But what's nice about our challenge is how good we can feel when we know our communities and our citizens are benefiting from our combined efforts to make floodplain management – and the NFIP – a success to minimize flood losses.

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## **Washington Legislative Report**

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### **Much Activity; Not Much Legislation Yet**

After a two week Spring Recess, the Congress is back for an already busy work period. Final action was taken on the Budget Resolution after resolving differences between House and Senate passed versions. Many hearings are scheduled on issues and topics of interest to ASFPM members and the association has been asked to testify at two hearings. There is much discussion and consideration of issues and bills that have been introduced among Members of Congress and at the staff level and expectations of legislation to be introduced or acted upon in the near future. Included are bills and prospective bills dealing with flood issues, levee and mapping concerns and climate issues.

While most of the action is in committees just now, the House did pass a bill on April 27<sup>th</sup> reauthorizing the Pre-Disaster Mitigation grant program for three years, H.R. 1746. The measure increases the annual authorization (not appropriation) to \$250 million and increases the allocation to each state to \$575,000 from \$500,000. The bill has now been referred to the Senate.

The House also passed a bill on April 23<sup>rd</sup> to implement a National Water Research and Development Initiative, H.R. 1145. The initiative is intended to improve the federal government's role in water research and development, data collection, dissemination, education and consideration of changes in water use and supply. It establishes an interagency committee to develop a National Water Research and Assessment Plan and sets up a National Water Initiative Coordination Office to support the committee. Among other elements, the Plan is to include plans for a national water census, research into watershed hydrology, development of a plan to assist state and local regions regarding land conservation, and identification of further research needs. A floor amendment was adopted which directs agencies under the interagency committee to assess the impact of natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes and tornadoes on water resources. The bill has now been referred to the Senate and its Environment and Public Works Committee.