

Testimony by  
Senator Tom Harkin  
Before the Committee on Environment and Public Works  
Concerning the Midwest floods  
July 23, 2008

Chairman Boxer and members of the Committee, I appreciate this opportunity to report to the Committee on the recent flooding in Iowa, and to share my views on the lessons we can draw from this disaster as we plan for similar events in the future.

First, I want to publicly salute the professionals in the Corps of Engineers, who worked day and night both before and during the flooding to minimize damage. In addition, local governments and many thousands of volunteers worked around the clock to fight the flood waters, and they did a magnificent job.

However, the storms and subsequent flooding were simply overwhelming. In Iowa, we had more rain in the first six months of this year than in any other six-month period on record. The already-saturated soil, combined with downpours day after day, resulted in what has been characterized as worse than 500-year flood events on the Cedar River, which inundated Cedar Rapids, and on the Iowa River, which flooded Iowa City and a number of other communities.

To give you some idea of the magnitude of the flooding, consider that, since the 1850s, the highest flood level in Cedar Rapids had been 20 feet. The levees in Cedar Rapids are at 22 feet. Last month, the water level rose to more than 31 feet, well above the estimated 500-year flood level.

In addition to the flooding, Iowa has been hit by a number of devastating tornadoes. Senator Chuck Grassley's hometown, New Hartford, was hit by an F5 tornado, killing two people. Just weeks later, the same town was engulfed by flood waters when a local levee failed to protect the community.

Thousands lost their homes and businesses

The obvious lesson we have learned is that we need to substantially increase the resources devoted to preventing flood damage. The current level of funding is clearly inadequate.

I am proud to have been the chief sponsor of the 1993 Hazard Mitigation and Relocation Assistance Act, which substantially increased the FEMA mitigation program. And, now, funding has been further increased for states with an approved mitigation plan. Mitigation is absolutely crucial and we need to substantially increase our efforts.

Where we have low-lying areas that are repeatedly flooded, an excellent alternative to building levees is to convert that land to parks and recreation uses.

The federal government should increase assistance to cities like Davenport, Iowa, that are taking this approach. However, this approach will not work in most cases, due to topography or existing structures. I would also add that flood plain easements can be a very useful tool in rural areas as an alternative to levees.

We need a formal assessment of what worked and what did not work during the recent flooding. But there are some things that are already clear.

One obvious problem is that we have a hodgepodge of levees in Iowa and elsewhere across the nation. Some levees are under the Corps authority, built to their

specifications. Some are owned by cities. Others are owned by drainage districts or are effectively privately maintained.

The ideal would be for the Corps to have responsibility for a national network of levees. However, I believe that, at a minimum, we should start with a regular program of Corps inspections of all significant levees, as Chairman Boxer proposed in the EPW-proposed version of the Corps reauthorization.

Regrettably, that proposed program was sharply narrowed to the creation of an inventory of levees in the final version of the Corps reauthorization. That is important, but it is only an initial step. We should go further by requiring rigorous inspections that identify needed maintenance and improvements.

The Corps budgets have been excessively tight for many years. In most cases, projects have been delayed at the design phase or construction phase for long periods because of lack of funding. Projects take far too many years to complete, and many do not get started at all. We need a substantial increase for the Corps and in many other areas of infrastructure improvement.

We need to improve our ability to predict very high flood levels. In Cedar Rapids, I am told, the modeling was not sophisticated enough to predict the kind of flooding we had in June, which was so far beyond normal boundaries. If local officials and citizens had been given warning of the potential for such a flood, they could have taken precautions accordingly, and damage could have been reduced.

Where we have reservoirs, I believe we need to consider operating with lower water levels in order to maximize flood protection. If we move major structures that might be damaged by significant water releases, this would allow for faster releases prior to water exceeding the spillway level.

When we begin a flood-control project, we need to improve the coordination between the Corps of Engineers and the USDA's watershed structure program, which constructs small flood-control structures in rural areas. These small structures can have a significant, positive impact, often at a reasonable cost. We need more conservation practices that slow the movement of water.

Today, levees across the United States are mostly 100-year-event levees. Given the realities of climate change and the greater frequency of severe weather, we need to revisit the assumptions behind this practice.

I would also like to note that a significant part of the damage in Iowa was not caused directly by the flooding rivers or tornadoes. It was caused in places where storm-water pipes and sewer pipes are combined. As the system was overwhelmed, the waste water was pushed directly into people's homes. We need to provide more support to cities as they work to modify these systems – to protect both property and the environment.

I am hopeful that the National Flood Risk Management Committee, which brings together federal agencies as well as state and local interests, can make excellent recommendations. But the bottom line is the bottom line: We simply need more funding for flood mitigation.

I thank the Committee.