Senator Richard J. Durbin
Midwest Floods
July 23, 2008

Before I begin, I want to thank Chairman Boxer and Ranking Member Inhofe for holding today's hearing and giving me an opportunity to talk about our experience in Illinois.

As we've just heard from Senator Harkin and Senator Grassley, Iowa and the rest of the Midwest is still reeling from weeks of flooding and tornadoes.

Damage estimates

We know from the Great Flood that devastated the Midwest in 1993 – and, more recently, from Hurricane Katrina and the California wildfires – that the losses from a natural disaster can be catastrophic and more than any one community or state can bear.

In Illinois, we still don't know the full extent of our losses. Damage assessments are ongoing. Some places, like Henderson County, are still underwater.

Although we were not as hard hit as our neighbors in Iowa, very early, very preliminary estimates put the costs of recovery and rebuilding for Illinois in the millions – maybe billions – of dollars.

The flooding started in early June even before the banks of the Mississippi began to overflow, along the Wabash and Embarras rivers in southeast Illinois. In Lawrenceville, over 10,000 people were without running water for more than a week.

Then, alone the Mississippi, record and near-record water levels caused levees to break, flooding hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland and forcing people from their homes in towns like Keithsburg and Gulfport.

Nearly two thousand homes have been impacted by the waters – everything from a flooded basement to complete destruction.

Farmers in my state face at least $1.3 billion in crop damage and the loss of hundreds of thousands of acres of corn and soybean.

Floodwaters have also caused damage to roads in the tens of millions of dollars.

Then there are the losses you can't count in dollars. There are people like Stacy whose home in Machesney Park was flooded. The Red Cross was able to move her disabled mother to a hotel but Stacy, her husband, and her four kids stayed in a car at a campsite because they couldn't afford a hotel.

Stacy isn't alone. Over 500 homes have been affected in Machesney Park, a small community in Winnebago County without a public works department and without trucks or any other equipment to help with the clean-up efforts.

My heart goes out to everyone affected by the floods, especially those have watched their homes and livelihoods disappear under muddy waters.

Commending Illinoisans

The damage is bad, but it could have been a lot worse had it not been for the hard work and determination of everyone who helped us prepare for the floods.

They showed up day after day – Illinois residents, volunteers, emergency workers, members of the National Guard.

In cities and towns all along the Mississippi, they worked around the clock to fill sandbags and fortify levees. Even after the flooding started, they didn't stop working. It's because of their perseverance that more levees – like Sny Island's – didn't overtop.

It's not easy to stand your ground in the face of a force as mighty as the Mississippi, but these folks did just that. Their resolve and determination showed an amazing spirit at work.

It's a spirit Senator Obama and I had a chance to see for ourselves when we helped sandbag in Quincy. I saw it again and again as I visited communities hit by the floods – from Grafton, south of Quincy on the Mississippi, to Lerna and Lawrenceville on the other side of the state, to Machesney Park up north by Rockford.

No doubt it's a spirit at work today as these river communities bounce back from the flooding.

As one City Council member said about her hometown of Grafton: "Grafton people are resilient people. They're river people."

I also want to commend the Illinois departments and agencies who worked 24/7 to ensure that communities had the resources to fight the floodwaters. They're still working today to make sure these communities are equipped with the resources to recover.

I want to thank FEMA, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the other federal agencies whose help has been essential to helping Illinois fight the floodwaters.

When Mother Nature brings her worst, we bring our best. Thanks to this team effort, even though the flooding may have been historic in some places along the river in Illinois, it looks like the damage will not be.

Looking forward

This is the second time in fifteen years that the Midwest has been devastated by historic flooding.

The Great Flood of 1993 was one of the costliest natural disasters to hit the United States. Back then I was a Congressman in central Illinois, with a big swath of the Mississippi River in my district, and I saw the devastation first hand.

More than 50 people died and thousands more were evacuated from their homes as hundreds of levees along the Mississippi failed. The economic damage exceeded $15 billion.

Experts told us this was a 500-year flood event. But then we found ourselves, 15 years later, facing a similar disaster.

It's clear that these 200- and 500-year flood events are happening more frequently than every 200 or 500 years. It's also clear that we need to do a better job preparing for them.

Often, weather-related disasters strike with no warning. But floods are different. We can see them coming. We can use the lessons of the past to better prepare for the future.

With that in mind, I want to offer a couple of observations from our experience in Illinois.

The first is the lack of clear direction on rail bridge operations during a natural disaster. It was a problem in 1993 and a problem in 2008. Both times the railroad companies refused to listen to the local community's concerns and to lift a bridge out of the way of oncoming floodwaters. In 1993, their refusal caused the water pressure to build and a levee to overtop. This time around, we were fortunate that the water levels were not high enough to cause a repeat of that situation.

During a flood event or other natural disaster, who has the navigation rights over an inland waterway? The answer is unclear.

A second concern is dewatering.

The flooding has receded in many parts of Illinois. But there are still some places – like parts of Henderson County – that are underwater. FEMA, the Corps, the Illinois Emergency Management Agency, and locals have been working together to drain the standing floodwaters. But it's been weeks since the rain stopped falling.

There has to be a better way to coordinate among the federal, state and local partners to more quickly help communities hardest hit by the floods get back on their feet.

Conclusion

I want to thank Chairman Boxer and Ranking Member Inhofe again for this chance to speak about my state's experience. An important part of the rebuilding and recovery effort is looking back to see what lessons can be brought to bear now and in the future. These lessons help us better prepare for and mitigate the damage from future flood events.

As we move forward to work on the second supplemental, I hope we keep in mind that disasters don't end with the news coverage. There are still communities across the Midwest trying to clean up and get on with their lives. We, the Congress, have to make sure we give them all the tools they need to do that. The communities and the people affected should not face this disaster alone. America, and this Senate, will stand with them.