

Flood Preparedness in the Red River Basin
2009
A Call to Action – Again

In the aftermath of the 2009 flood fight, the challenge we now face is how best to reduce damage from the inevitable next flood. Enormous amounts of time and money have been and will be invested in studies and efforts to construct dikes, levees, dams, and diversions to "protect" major cities, farmsteads and farmlands. State and local governments will repeat and hopefully expand efforts to reduce flood damages by purchasing flood-prone property, hardening infrastructure (e.g. sewers and lift stations), and elevating bridges and roadways. All these efforts have helped reduce damages during floods; however, it is not possible to build total "protection" from flooding, because there is always the chance of a greater flood occurring in the future.

Following the 1997 flood, the U.S. and Canadian governments asked the International Joint Commission to examine and report on the causes and effects of damaging floods in the Red River Basin. In addition, the International Flood Mitigation Initiative was convened for two years after 1997 and made recommendations aimed at mitigating damages from future floods. The conclusions from these efforts are still timely and valid today.

We request the local, state, and federal officials in the Red River Basin immediately take action necessary to:

1. Implement more widespread, integrated and decisive measures (based substantially on the International Joint Commission and International Flood Mitigation Initiative recommendations) to enhance flood resiliency and mitigate frequency of flood emergencies and associated costs;
2. Prohibit construction of structures in urban areas that were inundated or threatened by the 2009 flood (i.e. protected by temporary dikes) - even if they are surrounded by ring dikes or elevated above the flood plain using earthen pads - until measures providing reasonable assurances that these areas will not be inundated during future events of similar magnitude are implemented;
3. Prohibit construction of structures in geologically unstable riverbank areas to protect private investments and public funds;
4. Establish river corridors that allow rivers and streams to meander and move and flow more naturally within their floodplains over time (i.e. with less constriction) during high water;
5. Expedite a formal review and evaluation of existing Red River Basin resource management organizations and implement actions necessary to ensure meaningful and measurable basin-wide flood damage reduction outcomes are achieved by 2010.

Future flooding events in the Red River Basin are inevitable. The frequency, duration, and extent of flooding are the result of natural phenomena beyond our control and there is no single solution to reduce flood damages in the Red River Basin. However, many of the aforementioned recommendations can be fully implemented to effectively mitigate future damages to infrastructure and property. Sadly, flood experiences and memories fade quickly and local land use authorities will again be faced with continuous pressures to compromise our flood resiliency and allow development in flood prone and unstable river bank areas. Reducing future flood damages for us and our children requires leadership and decisive actions that are science-based and forward thinking. We must be willing to use every tool available to improve our resiliency and mitigate future damages to infrastructure, communities, farms, and the environment.