SPECIAL FOCUS: 
Midwest Floods, Spring 1997

Will We Learn the Lessons 
Of Grand Forks?

by Roger A. Pielke, Jr.

Unless you have been spending time on Space Station Mir or some other news vacuum, the April 1997 flooding in North Dakota and its subsequent political impacts were hard to miss. However, in spite of all the media attention, we risk letting the most important lessons of Grand Forks evaporate into history.

About five months ago, communities in the Red River of the North basin experienced record flooding. Extreme floods were also experienced in other parts of Minnesota. The greatest societal impacts occurred in the neighboring towns of Grand Forks, ND and East Grand Forks, MN where significant portions of the two communities were submerged under flood waters. Preliminary damage estimates total more than $1 billion.

Using the Lessons

We have much to learn from the experiences of those in Grand Forks — about topics such as flood insurance, forecasting, flood-fighting, inter- and intra-governmental coordination, the media, disaster relief, etc. It would make sense to conclude that the lessons of this particular case can go a long way toward improving societal responses to floods in the Red River basin and elsewhere.

Yet, it seems that in the recent past, lessons drawn from flood events are not particularly well-incorporated into local, state, or national flood policy. How else can we explain the fact that essentially the same causes account for flood disasters that we have seen over the past five years?

A study of the Great Flood of 1993 (S. Changnon, ed., The Great Flood of 1993: Causes, Impacts, and Responses, Westview Press, Boulder, CO) came to much the same conclusions, stating that "thoughtful past recommendations of how to attain flood mitigation have not been adequately implemented."

The Grand Forks disaster will be closely examined by various federal agencies, non-profit organizations, and physical and social scientists. Within about a year, there will be numerous reports, reviews, and studies which distill important lessons from the event. An unanswered question is to what extent the lessons drawn from Grand Forks will be incorporated into the process of flood policies in the Red River basin and beyond.

Lessons Not Enough

One "meta-lesson" that should be drawn from the recent spate of flood disasters of the 1990s is that to improve our state, local, and national flood policies, it is not enough to draw lessons from them; those lessons must be incorporated into actual decision making.

Perhaps a first step in that difficult process of improving the linkage of knowledge to action is to think more broadly about lessons. Clearly, someone must assume or be given responsibility to ensure that lessons are considered in particular processes of decision, once things "get back to normal." Otherwise, we risk perpetuating a situation where our policies fail to reflect the depth and breadth of the knowledge that we have gained from much experience and suffering with the impacts of floods.

Short Term Steps

What steps can be taken in the short term? While there are no easy or simple answers, there are a few actions which would pay immediate dividends:

- Federal agencies should occasionally conduct "non-disaster surveys" to document what went right in locales that almost suffered a disaster but did not. Quite rightly, federal agencies pay close attention to communities that actually suffer disasters. But it would make sense to take a look at places like, for example in the Red River of the North basin, Whapeton, Fargo, and Pembina and assess why these communities experienced different outcomes (i.e., "non-disasters") than did Grand Forks.

- In a similar vein, governmental and non-governmental agencies should take a long term view in assessing lessons. For instance, lessons learned by the State of Missouri in the 1993 floods paid dividends in 1995, following the Missouri buyout program. Success stories like this one need to be told and retold. FEMA recently compiled a set of similar successes in a report on the costs and benefits of mitigation. These (continued on page 9)
success stories should be encouraged and supported. As a society, we don’t know focus enough attention on policy successes.

Observers of and participants in flood policies should also track the course of lessons: what happens to recommendations in the decision making process? What accounts for failures to change behavior? In some cases it may be that the simple act of assessing progress with respect to lessons serves to keep them on the policy agenda and thus reduces the chances that they will be forgotten or neglected.

Major floods result in large impacts on society. They also result in a wealth of knowledge about how we might reduce our vulnerability to future impacts. While it is often difficult to link knowledge to action, with a broader perspective on lessons and their significance for flood-related decisions, perhaps we might better build upon hard-earned experience, and thus reduce the risk of repeating mistakes of the past.

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