



NEW YORK STATE
FLOODPLAIN AND STORMWATER MANAGERS ASSOCIATION

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November 5, 2008

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New York Congressional Delegation
Sent by Facsimile

RE: Reliable funding for the USGS Streamgaging Network

Dear Congressman:

The New York State Floodplain and Stormwater Managers Association (NYSFSMA) is a statewide professional organization dedicated to reducing loss of life and property damage resulting from floods. Our members work in various capacities to manage the risks associated with drainage and flooding. In order to do that effectively they need information about those risks. One essential source of information is the real-time and historic stream flow and lake level data provided by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) stream gage system. Data from this system are used for floodplain management, infrastructure design, flood forecasting, flood response, operation of flood control projects, water quality protection, drought management, boating safety, and other purposes. We are writing to urge you to support the development of a reliable system for funding the National Streamgaging Network.

River gage data are critically important for flood safety and damage prevention. Historic flow information is used for floodplain mapping, which documents flood risks. These maps are vital tools for managing development in flood-prone areas and designing mitigation projects that protect lives and property (and thus reduce disaster relief expenses). Accurate historical flow information is also essential for designing bridges, dams, and other infrastructure. Real-time river flow and lake level gage data are used by the NOAA National Weather Service to develop river and lake level forecasts. These forecasts and the current gage data are used for emergency operation of flood control projects (installation of levee closures, managing dam releases, etc.). Emergency personnel also rely on accurate real-time data and timely forecasts to respond effectively during flood events. These flood protection and response activities are credited with saving millions of dollars in flood damages. And more importantly – they save lives.

The NYSFSMA is a state chapter of the Association of State Floodplain Managers, which in September 2007 was one of many organizations signing the attached letter supporting increased funding for the USGS stream gaging program in FY-2009. Each year the budget process results in discontinuation of additional gages due to “inadequate funding.” As FY-2009 approached, we learned that this year the gages threatened with discontinuation included 20 stream gages in the Southern Tier of New York and additional gages upstream in Pennsylvania. Constituents were concerned about this potential discontinuation of service because the gages in question are critical for public safety. And

the cost for maintenance and operation of existing gages is small compared to the financial and safety benefits they provide. Subsequent negotiations among the various “partner” agencies resulted in continued funding for most of these threatened gages. However, this funding solution is “temporary.” It is time for congress to develop a unified strategy for meeting this country’s need for a river gaging system.

The National Streamgaging Network is operated by the U.S. Geological Survey. Funding for maintenance and operation of these gages is provided by a conglomeration of agencies and organizations, referred to as “partners” or “cooperators.” Although the gages are used by numerous federal, state, regional, and local agencies, as well as businesses and the general public, the bulk of the expense for each gage is generally borne by a single “partner.” These costs may be difficult to justify because they are not driven by the primary goal of the sponsoring agency’s mission. The result is a convoluted funding stream that leaves the gaging system very susceptible to changes in funding.

We recommend that the responsibility for funding the nation’s gage system be consolidated within the agency that installs and maintains them – the U.S. Geological Survey. Their mission: *“The USGS serves the Nation by providing reliable scientific information to describe and understand the Earth; minimize loss of life and property from natural disasters; manage water, biological, energy, and mineral resources; and enhance and protect our quality of life.”* It would make sense that the USGS be provided with direct funding for maintenance and operation of the nation’s river gage system. It is consistent with their mission. And consistent funding through a single federal agency should enable uninterrupted collection of river flow data, as well as other key environmental data, to support the activities of a wide range of customers.

We live in a time of increasing flood risks due to the impacts of development and changing weather patterns. It is unwise to rely on a piecemeal funding system for operation of the river gaging system that is essential for flood risk analysis, effective warnings, emergency operations, and emergency management. We thus urge you to support the development of a more reliable system for funding the nation’s river gage system. If I can provide additional information or assistance, please contact me at 607-737-5271 or jthigpen@co.chemung.ny.us.

Sincerely,



Janet Thigpen, CFM
Chair

Attachment: Joint letter in support of increased funding for USGS stream gaging programs

Cc: Dirk Kempthorne, Secretary of Interior, U.S. Dept. of Interior
James A. Nussle, Director, Office of Management & Budget
Paul Swartz, Susquehanna River Basin Commission
Carol R. Collier, Delaware River Basin Commission
William Nechamen, NYS Department of Environmental Conservation
Richard Olin, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Michael Schaffner, NOAA National Weather Service
Rafael Rodriguez, U.S. Geological Survey
Larry Larson, Association of State Floodplain Managers