

SELF EDUCATION BEST PREPARATION

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Traditionally, at-risk communities have been 'prepared' for flooding by local and state authorities but recent research suggests that the most resilient communities are those that prepare themselves with the assistance and partnership of these authorities.

Although the focus of floodplain management has moved beyond only structural measures such as levees and detention basins, community education has often been an afterthought in flood mitigation programs. Moreover, much of this education has focussed on 'awareness-raising' delivered by authorities in a 'top-down' way which has proven to be largely ineffective.

The importance of people's reaction to floods is now starting to be acknowledged in floodplain risk management. This stems from recognition of the limitations of structural works in minimising the impacts of floods and that individuals may have to rely on their own planning and preparation before, during and after an emergency.

According to Molino Stewart flood education expert, Neil Dufty, 'Critical to an understanding of the social aspects of flooding are the concepts of "vulnerability" and "resilience". Vulnerability is the susceptibility to experience loss from exposure to flooding. Some groups and individuals are more vulnerable to flooding due to factors such as age, social networks, their personalities and education levels.

'Resilience is the capacity of individuals and communities to adapt or adjust to flooding. Two factors determining resilience are the existence of and access to resources that allow for preparation (e.g. emergency services, information, warning systems, personal flood emergency plans) and the ability to utilise these resources during and after a flood event.'

In the social context, flood risk management should aim to reduce community vulnerability and increase its resilience.

'One effective way to do this is through flood education guided by a well-researched, coordinated and community-supported plan that involves local partnerships and consultation', suggests NSW SES Senior Community Education Officer, David Webber.

Guided by current research, Mr. Dufty believes community flood education plans should:

- Be based on social research. This research can help inform the plan through a study of the local community including identifying most vulnerable groups, perceptions of flood risk, behaviours in the last flood and community levels of preparedness, networks and needs. The social research can also supply baseline data to evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives in the plan.

- Recognise there are changing community demands as a flood event proceeds. The plan should relate to stages of a flood from initial impact, through collaboration with emergency agencies during the flood to recovery and rebuilding.
- Understand that providing the community with flood information will not necessarily lead to preparedness - there are other factors and barriers that may determine individual and community preparedness.
- Ensure that communities are involved in the preparation, implementation and evaluation of the plan. Research shows that this is a more effective approach than the 'top-down' one because communities take ownership for the plan.
- Be locally driven and maintained.
- Recognise the existing capacities of the community to prepare and respond to a flood including its networks, leadership and infrastructure
- Identify the most appropriate education tools for that setting.
- Link with other floodplain management initiatives including structural works and other non-structural activities such as land use planning, warning systems, house raising and flood proofing.

According to Mr Webber, 'Four communities in NSW have recently prepared (or started to prepare) flood education plans for their area.' These communities are:

- Maitland (instigated by the Hunter-Central Rivers Catchment Management Authority and the SES)
- Newport Beach (Pittwater Council)
- Lismore (Lismore Levee Management Committee)
- Rockdale City (Rockdale City Council)

The preparation of the plans has been guided by local committees comprising representatives of residents, businesses, local councils and government agencies such as the SES, NSW Department of Natural Resources and, in Lismore, the NSW Department of Commerce.

'Some of the plans are starting to be implemented and we are confident that they will support local authorities to better engage the community and individuals to assist them in planning, preparing and responding to floods', Mr Webber concluded.

Already Maitland has begun to implement some of the actions in its plan including the production of a DVD resource (see page 8).

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