

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After several decades of work and a multibillion dollar investment to address flood problems in the United States, the average annual death rate from floods appears to have been stabilized, but flood losses (public and private property damage, injuries, disruption, and disaster relief) continue to rise, and the natural resources provided by floodplains are still being destroyed. The recent devastating floods were a harsh reminder of the high price that must be paid for unwise land use decisions, failure to account for natural forces, and lack of preparedness.

Floodplains throughout the United States today are managed through the decisions of countless groups and individuals, from property owners to elected officials to hired specialists. Their choices are subject to Federal, state, and local laws, programs, and policies for flood control, water resources management, economic development, environmental protection, disaster assistance, and other objectives. The Unified National Program for Floodplain Management is the Federal government's means of focusing these disparate perspectives toward the national good. It does this by setting out a conceptual framework for floodplain management that includes a statement of overall purpose, definitions, working and general principles, and management strategies and tools; by setting national goals and a timetable for their achievement; by providing for periodic evaluations of the status of floodplain management in the Nation; and by defining the roles and responsibilities of each level of government and the private sector.

Floodplain management aims to achieve

- A reduction in the loss of life, disruption, and damage caused by floods; and
- The preservation and restoration of the natural resources and functions of floodplains (which, in turn, lessens damage potential).

When both of those purposes are achieved within a given floodplain—that is, when the activities that take place within it are compatible with *both* the risks to human life and property posed by floods *and* the risks to the floodplain's natural functions posed by the human activities—it is said that the floodplain is being put to “wise use.” Floodplain management, therefore, is defined as *a decision-making process that aims to achieve the wise use of the Nation's floodplains.*

There are four main strategies for managing floodplains: (1) modifying human susceptibility to flood damage and disruption; (2) modifying the impact of flooding on individuals and the community; (3) modifying flooding; and (4) preserving and restoring the natural resources of floodplains. Each strategy is supported by an array of tools (local ordinances, hazard and resource identification programs, control structures, development/redevelopment policies, public awareness campaigns, etc.).

Under this framework, the decisions of floodplain managers involve choosing the best mixture of strategies and tools, balancing competing uses, weighing costs and benefits, and evaluating various alternatives—always keeping in mind the physical characteristics of the floodplain in question, the needs and desires of the people who have an interest in it, and the potential impact proposed uses will have on the future.

To ensure that the result of this ongoing, nationwide decisionmaking process is *improvement* of the status of the Nation's floodplains, four broad goals have been recommended, along with a list of objectives that must be accomplished to reach them. A schedule for their achievement has also been outlined. A mechanism for evaluating progress and for setting additional, more specific goals will be formalized by 1995, and a national forum in 1996 is expected to solidify participation in this procedure among the Federal, state, local, and private decisionmakers and professional groups concerned with floodprone areas.

- Goal 1. Formalize a national goal-setting and monitoring system for floodplain management.
- Goal 2. Reduce, by at least half, the risks to life, property, and the natural resources of the nation's floodplains.
- Goal 3. Develop and implement a process to encourage positive attitudes toward floodplain management.
- Goal 4. Establish in-house floodplain management capability nationwide.

This update of the Unified National Program draws upon previous versions, the floodplain management experience gained at all levels of government over the past several decades, and the findings and recommendations detailed in Chapter 16 of the 1992 *Floodplain Management in the United States: An Assessment Report*. It differs from prior proposals for a Unified National Program in that it focuses on the need to work toward national goals, rather than simply calling for better coordination and consolidation of authorities. This update is the first Unified National Program document to set out measurable, action-oriented goals, specific objectives by which they may be reached, a timetable for their achievement, and a mechanism for evaluating progress.

During the last decade, several trends have altered the circumstances within which floodplain management takes place. There now is stronger public sentiment for resource protection, and an even more compelling need for it. Increased scientific knowledge and technological capabilities will improve large-scale, comprehensive floodplain management undertakings. Shifts in responsibilities and capabilities among the levels of government and the private sector have resulted in more active participation by states and localities. These and other developments have placed the United States in a position to carry out a unified approach to managing floodplains and their resources. By focusing the attention of all levels of government and the private sector on the national need for an integrated, sustainable approach to managing the human resources and natural functions of the Nation's floodplain lands, and by working toward achieving the long-term goals set out here, the vision of a unified national program for floodplain management can be realized.