

**Statement of Congressman John Hall Before the U.S. House Committee on Transportation
and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and
Emergency Management
“National Flood Plain Remapping: The Practical Impact”
April 2, 2008**

I would like to thank the Committee for having this hearing, and for inviting me to testify about an issue of vital importance to towns and cities throughout the country.

I would like to begin by noting specifically that I am glad the Committee has chosen to title this hearing “National Flood Plain Remapping: The Practical Impact”, because if there is one point that my testimony makes to the Committee today, I hope it is that this process will have a real and significant impact on the daily lives of people in my district and elsewhere.

The results of this process will impact the value of people’s homes, the costs to maintain them, and the fate of homes and businesses unfortunate enough to be affected by future floods.

As we have seen in recent years, extreme weather events are occurring with alarming frequency. Too often, these events create flooding that leaves homes battered, businesses reeling, infrastructure broken, and communities devastated.

My district, in New York’s Hudson Valley, has been far from immune. Floods have had an incredibly destructive impact on the Hudson Valley, and in recent years the flooding has become so frequent that town supervisors, farmers, and homeowners have reason to look over their shoulders or up at the skies every time it drizzles.

The region has experienced three “50 Year” floods in this decade alone. That rate of activity strains the ability of emergency services to respond, communities to recover, and local resource managers to prepare.

The full force of flooding impacts became evident a year ago during last April’s Nor’easter. The rains only lasted a weekend, but the damage is still being repaired. Roads were washed out, fields submerged, and homes and businesses were damaged. After those storms FEMA made a disaster declaration opening the way for assistance, but it’s clear that we need more than an ad hoc approach to prevention, mitigation, and recovery.

Unfortunately, recent history and the forces of climate change leave us with too much uncertainty to simply hope that these events are anomalies that will soon be remembered only as historical quirks or weather channel trivia. It is clear that our government must take steps to be prepared for future events.

One of the most challenging consequences will be the modernization of the National Flood Insurance Program and the update of the National Flood Plain Map. As FEMA moves forward with this process it must take a methodical, comprehensive approach that will be effective, fair, and avoid undue cost to taxpaying homeowners.

A large part of this process should be the provision of avenues for communities, particularly those that will be newly included in the flood plains, to voice their concerns or protests with FEMA without undue burden.

Several communities in Orange County, New York would be included in the flood plain map and forced to purchase insurance for the first time under the preliminary Flood Insurance Rate Map (FIRM) regarding Base Flood Elevations (BFE) within Orange County, New York. The data needed for an appeal of the draft would require hydrologic and hydraulic studies that must be paid for by individual homeowners or local governments.

Despite the highly technical and costly nature of these studies, FEMA allows only a 90 day comment period. 90 days may be a standard window here in Washington, DC for federal officials, but for homeowners struggling with property taxes and small towns with limited expertise, that's a fast turnaround.

Although FEMA has since informed my office that the review process in one city will allow other communities to register protest until late May, these procedures are hard to navigate and need to be made more accessible to the stakeholders who will have to live with impact of the new flood plain map on a day to day basis. In either instance, it would not be feasible to finance and conduct these studies before the current public comment deadline.

I am not suggesting that towns and cities should be able to skirt inclusion in the flood plain if it is truly warranted. But if there are local concerns that inclusion is unjustified or detrimental it should be easier for communities to make their case to FEMA directly.

Efforts to update the National Flood Insurance Program are right to account for changing circumstances, and the new map should take prospective factors into account. Specifically, the human factor of local growth and the environmental factor of climate change must be taken into account. Both will directly impact flood activity in my district.

Orange County, New York is one of the fastest growing areas in the state. We are proud that more people are choosing to make the county their home, and are working hard to manage the development that their presence requires. The region is also blessed with abundant streams and rivers that may exhibit changing characteristics as sea levels, precipitation activity, and other factors react to our changing climate.

As FEMA moves forward it needs to find ways for the new flood map to recognize the need for growth and extend protection to vulnerable communities in order to prevent the blessing of our water resources from becoming a curse.

I thank the Committee for examining this issue, and look forward to working with my colleagues, FEMA, and the Army Corps of Engineers to ensure that FEMA's update of the National Flood Plain Map is responsible, effective, and in the national interest.