

Rep. Doris Matsui Sits on Flood Panel in Congress Calls for Obtainable Standards and Focus on Public

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – Today, Rep. Doris Matsui (CA-05) testified on a panel in the House Transportation & Infrastructure Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings and Emergency Management. The hearing, held at the urging of Rep. Matsui, focused on the practical impact of national flood plain remapping. Video of the hearing is available at the Transportation & Infrastructure website at <http://transportation.house.gov>.

The following is Congresswoman Matsui's submitted statement:

Madame Chairwoman, I am very pleased to be here today. Thank you for allowing me to testify on such an important issue. Since coming to Congress I have always made protecting my citizens from flooding my top priority. I am encouraged that the Committee is further examining this issue.

It is important to come together today and share how our communities are dealing with the constant threat of floods. I appreciate what my colleagues have said thus far and I am looking forward to hearing from the other witnesses about the Corps's nationwide evaluation of levees and the standards set for those levees.

I also look forward to hearing from FEMA about its national flood plain remapping program and what effects that effort is having on flood plain communities.

As a nation, we need to make a significant investment in all aspects of our country's infrastructure. This includes our levee systems in our flood plains.

Like roads, bridges, and airport runways, levees need constant maintenance. This constant maintenance is part of the burden we bear for living near one of nature's greatest resources -- its rivers.

My district sits at the confluence of two great rivers. The residents of Sacramento realize that we need to constantly maintain and improve the levees that protect our homes, families and businesses.

Sacramento is considered to have the highest flood risk of any major metropolitan city in the United States. More than 440,000 people; 110,000 structures; the Capitol of the State of California; and up to \$58 billion are at risk.

Yet, my district has truly been a positive poster-child in its efforts to bolster our flood control system since our near-catastrophic flood in 1986. We have investigated our levees, planned our projects, assessed ourselves millions of dollars, pushed our state to be a full partner, and begun to build the projects that will get us to a greater than 200 year level of protection. In fact, our latest assessment commits over \$400 million of local dollars to this effort. We are fully committed to flood protection.

I am very proud of the flood control work we've accomplished in my district of Sacramento, California. We know we still have a long way to go, but what we don't need at this point is to have the rug pulled from under us.

That leads me to why we are here today; to discuss where our national flood control policy is and where it is headed. Specifically I would like to discuss what the Corps of Engineers has proposed to use as its "new standard" for levees as written about in their Draft Engineers Technical Letter first released in 2007.

I think we can all agree that it is important to set robust standards when it comes to public safety. But I am concerned with the Corps proposed levee standard; not because I don't want greater public safety for everyone who lives in a flood plain; but because we may not be addressing our biggest problems when it comes to flooding.

This new standard creates a goal for us that is so far off the chart it is unobtainable. We must maintain the trust of our local communities; communities that are investing their hard earned dollars, time, and future goals. We can not put the brass ring out of reach.

I understand that the historical data of a flood plain is not enough. In order to compute a watershed's flood frequency analysis to estimate the risk it faces you must also use probabilities. And depending on what probability theory you use, a watershed could have greatly different flood threats. So if you are proposing a change to the methodology being used for levee standards nationwide we must be extremely careful to get it right. We must pursue a policy that addresses the need for public safety.

The problem I see is that we are setting the bar for communities in the flood plain and leaving it to them to best figure out how to mitigate for that risk. I am not a flood engineer, but I understand that the Corps is proposing to use a method of analysis often referred to as the "Monte Carlo" simulation. It may just be a name, but any method with a label like that needs to be greatly scrutinized.

I am also concerned that by using this new standard we may in actuality be holding communities to different standards. The Midwest communities that contend with the wide and massive Mississippi River have very different watersheds from the west. Their levees are set back, their floodplains are much larger, and they often have days of warning when a flood is coming. In Sacramento's watershed, we have Sierra snowpack that can melt quickly and in some cases give floodplain residents only hours of notice of a flood. Our levees are a result of the gold rush and are built immediately adjacent to the river. And, we have the warm coast that can make our weather patterns change rapidly. So I am concerned that a universal approach will not recognize these very significant regional differences.

If getting communities the highest level of protection in the quickest time possible is our goal we also need to localize some of this policy...specifically the 408 permit process. By allowing local Corps Districts to approve 408 permits so that work can be done quickly to upgrade levees, a commitment to public safety will be demonstrated.

We need to get federal flood control policy right because communities such as mine are paying a huge price. I know FEMA's goal in remapping is to make communities safe. We all can agree that public safety is the number one priority. But unless we accurately estimate the threat our communities will pay huge economic consequences without getting additional safety. Also, I worry about people on fixed incomes and their ability to meet flood insurance requirements. Even if the annual payment could be broken into two installments it would be easier. My point is: we need flexibility and we need to get this correct.

The good news is that we know how to fix our flood protection problems and make the city safer. From strengthening our levees to the Joint Federal Project at Folsom Dam, I continue to advocate for a regional approach to our flood protection.

I don't want all the good work we are doing to be wasted. We must have obtainable standards that recognize the regional differences in flood protection and flood plain analysis. Public safety needs to take precedence across the country, and new standards must allow communities to actually achieve measures that will allow them to be safe.

I want to thank the Subcommittee for allowing me to be here and looking into this important issue. I will be more than happy to answer any questions you may have.

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