

National Levee Safety Program – The Path Forward

Eric C. Halpin, P.E., Special Assistant for Dam and Levee Safety and Vice Chair of the National Committee on Levee Safety, US Army Corps of Engineers, Washington, DC

ABSTRACT

We are at a critical juncture in our nation's history – risks of loss of life, property damage, and damage to our natural environment behind levees are increasing. Levees across the nation often have been central tools in flood risk management, reducing the effects of floods on people, property, and the environment. The infrastructure that we depend on during emergencies – roads, hospitals, drinking and wastewater facilities, and power generating facilities – also depends on levees.

Although we do know that there are levees in all 50 states, the total number, location, and condition of many of the nation's levees – and the population and property they protect – remain unknown. Preliminary estimates indicate there may be more than 100,000 miles of levees across the United States, and tens of millions of people live and work behind them.

Even though levees were originally constructed to protect property, often they have inadvertently increased flood risks by attracting greater development to the floodplain. In fact, many levees built to protect agricultural fields now protect large urban communities. The potential consequences of levee failure in these communities can be devastating. But we as a nation have failed to pay attention to this essential piece of our infrastructure. Many of our levees are deteriorating as the result of decades of neglect. Even levees that have been maintained over the years may not have been brought up to the most recent engineering standards.

The nation's attention was refocused on the role of levees as a critical piece of the nation's infrastructure most recently with the Midwest floods (1993 and 2008), California floods (1986 and 1997), and, of course, the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina (2005). Coupled with how much we rely on the nation's levees for our life, property, and economy, we are promoting the conditions for the next disaster? When and where the next significant levee failure will occur is not known. What we do know is that it will occur.