40 Years of Fighting for Sound Floodplain Management

Stories, interviews and multimedia features during the Association of State Floodplain Managers 40th anniversary celebration in 2016

So much happened in 1976. The United States was celebrating her bicentennial; U.S. National Academy of Sciences warned that CFCs used in aerosol cans was damaging the ozone layer; the $2 bill was issued; Howard Hughes died; the Teton Dam collapsed; two spacecraft landed on Mars; the Big Thompson Canyon Flood in Colorado killed 143 people; Hurricane Belle crashed into the East Coast and Hurricane Liza hit the West and Southwest, killing 1,263; Patty Hearst was sentenced to seven years in prison for her role in a 1974 bank robbery; “One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest” was released; Jimmy Carter was elected president and the Pittsburgh Steelers won the Super Bowl.

But it was a small gathering of state floodplain managers in a Chicago hotel room in 1976 who, unbeknownst to them at the time, were bringing to life what we all know today as the Association of State Floodplain Managers.

A little background. Congress created the National Flood Insurance Program in 1968 (housed at the time under the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development). We all know how important maps are to the program, and in the early 1970s, NFIP staff started working directly with communities to create these maps and bypass state review. The problem, said ASFPM Director Emeritus Larry Larson, was that the six states that made up Region V (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin) already had floodplain management programs in place and were creating their own maps.

“At the time, NFIP had a very small engineering staff,” he said. “We encouraged them to work through us (the states), and not go directly to the communities, because we had experienced engineers and were doing our own maps. The NFIP even stopped asking us to check their maps before they went out. And while mapping was the main instigator, another one was regulation. We had state-mandated laws and had adopted legislation, which was different and usually stronger than the NFIP. Communities were getting mixed messages, so we wanted to get the NFIP to work with us rather than around us.”

ASFPM’s first employees (L-R): Lynn Phillips (administrative assistant), Larry Larson (executive director at the time) and Diane Brown (executive office manager at the time) 1996.
In 1976, representatives from the states decided to get together in Chicago before the annual meeting with the NFIP Region V representative. The hotel room included Larson and Mark Riebau (WI), Peter Finke (Ohio, now deceased), Gordon Lance (IN), Patricia Bloomgren and Jim Wright (MN), Jim Boulton, (MI), and French Wetmore (who at the time lived in Illinois).

“The states came to the meeting a half day early to update each other on what we were doing, share notes on how collaboration with the NFIP was or was not working in the state, and discuss how we could work with the NFIP to build state and local capability, avoid duplication of effort and improve flood mapping and floodplain management throughout the region,” Larson said.

He said the group agreed that they should continue updating each other throughout the year, and Lance volunteered to “be the chair,” to keep the information flowing, which happened via snail mail because, of course, there was no email at the time and long distance calls were expensive.

The following year, ASFPM’s first conference, then called annual meetings, took place in French Wetmore’s office in Chicago. In fact, a document from the Department of Homeland Security called, “A Chronology of Major Events Affecting the National Flood Insurance Program,” has a notation for August 1977, that states, “Concerned with delays in issuing flood insurance studies, the [Federal Insurance Administration] decides to circumvent the state review and approval process. The states in Region V object. The FIA subsequently revises the study policy. The states’ success in altering the policy change solidifies their cause and pushes them to form an association that eventually becomes the Association of State Floodplain Managers.”

Dave Carlton (1983), currently serving as ASFPM’s Region 10 Director.


Rebecca Quinn (1996) was our legislative officer from 1988-2010, and today writes “Floodplain Manager’s Notebook.”
And as you all know, that was just the tip of the iceberg in the association making waves on Capitol Hill.

But it was 1979 that proved to be a “watershed moment” for ASFPM. Patricia Bloomgren from Minnesota was hosting the meeting and decided to put a notice in the American Planning Association’s planning journal, announcing that Region V states were meeting with the NFIP in St. Paul, Minnesota to discuss problems with the NFIP maps.

What happened next was an eye-opener for Region V states. Because of that announcement, 19 state floodplain managers showed up for the meeting, from as far away as Alaska, New York, California, Louisiana, etc. “This made it clear that flood mapping issues and issues of NFIP coordination were not unique to Region V,” Larson said.

1982 marks a change in ASFPM’s “annual meetings,” moving from a sit down with the states, NFIP and a few other feds, to its first floodplain management “technical and policy conference” in Madison, Wisconsin.

That first technical conference was more about all floodplain managers discussing all aspects of floodplain management. Larson said, “Jon Kusler, a renowned attorney in land use law and states (who went on to found the Association of State Wetland Managers), was instrumental in helping us design the format and content for the conference, which is about the same format we use today.”

175 participants attended the Madison conference, complete with plenaries, concurrent sessions and a field trip to Soldiers Grove (the nation’s first downtown relocation out of the floodplain after the community rejected a federally-funded levee). A number of attendees from that first conference went on to become leaders in ASFPM over the years (Dan Accurti, Jean Brown and Les Bond are just a few examples).

Larson said, “ASFPM conferences were designed to build a ‘family’ atmosphere, where we all share our professional successes and failures, learn from each other, support and help each other.

“We would sit around someone’s hotel room talking floodplain management until the wee hours, then be right back at it early the next morning. A field trip or evening activity served to build that bond and to build it year after year,” Larson said. “This closeness was easier to achieve when the conference was less than 500 people, but even now when it hits 1,200 or so, we work hard to build in events and opportunities to create that family feeling.”

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Building on the “family feeling” is ASFPM’s legion of volunteers, from our Board of Directors, policy committees, Certification Board of Regents, Foundation Board, and liaisons to national boards like the National Academy of Sciences.

Larson was one of ASFPM’s first volunteers. After serving as chair for three years, he remained the volunteer executive director for 20 years until his retirement from the state of Wisconsin in 1997. The ASFPM board asked Larson to become a part-time, paid executive director to work with the two employees who had been hired (Diane Brown, our outreach and events manager, and Lynn Phillips, an administrative assistant).

And even though ASFPM today has a staff of 18 and more than 17,000 members, Larson said the 100+ volunteers who devote thousands of hours to the profession and organization each year, are the backbone of the association.

He said, “Many of these people have been doing this for decades, and without them, the organization could not be what it is today. Almost all of the past chairs continue to be actively engaged in some facet of ASFPM. The membership and floodplain management profession owe them untold gratitude.”

There are days when Larson thinks back on that hotel room meeting in Chicago 40 years ago, and is excited at how much the association has grown over the years.

He said, “I think the next 40 years are going to be just as exciting and interesting, and probably just as frustrating. But one thing has become perfectly clear year after year—those of us trying to reduce flood losses in the nation will never be out of a job.”

Below are various photos of “family time” during ASFPM national conferences.

Jim Wright speaking at 1992 conference in Grand Rapids, Michigan as Larry Larson looks on.

What do you give a man who had won every ASFPM award except the kitchen sink? A kitchen sink. This was presented by Les Bond (left) to French Wetmore during the 1993 conference in Atlanta, Georgia.

Group photo from the 1982 conference in Madison, Wisconsin.

Crawfish feed at 1985 conference in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Canoe trip at 1994 conference in Tulsa.
ASFPM history: Ya gotta hear it to believe it!

Probably one of the best pranks ever perpetrated by Larry Larson, one of the founders of the Association of State Floodplain Managers, was during the 1982 national conference in Madison, Wisconsin.

Larson introduced the luncheon speaker Professor Wolfgang von Schlosser, a man who in a very thick German accent, poked fun at America’s reliance on the 100-year-flood as a useful measuring stick and how fixed FEMA and the Corps of Engineers were in support of it. The professor also spoke of a hilarious “lesson learned” example of early floodplain management practices in Liechtenstein. But it wasn't until von Schlosser said that Hitler lost the war mostly due to his lack of knowledge of floodplain management principles, that the audience began to figure out that they'd been tricked.

Larson had cajoled Frank "Chick" Derringer, a co-worker of his at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, to play the part of the opinionated German professor.

“I looked out into the audience and could just see the lightbulbs going on as people started to figure it out,” recounted Larson. He also laughed at the memory of French Wetmore, also one of ASFPM’s founding members. Larson said Wetmore was frantically taking notes of everything von Schlosser was saying at the luncheon. “After a couple pages of notes, French finally figured it out and slammed his pencil on the table.”

Somebody had the good sense to record von Schlosser’s speech that day. We’ve converted that tape cassette, and uploaded a slideshow with audio on YouTube so that everyone can have a listen to the great von Schlosser prank of 1982. Enjoy!

"Professor" Wolfgang von Schlosser speaks at ASFPM’s 1982 national conference.
40 Years of ASFPM History Captured in One Interactive Timeline!

Click here for the timeline.

Like our 40th anniversary logo? Like it enough to have it embroidered on a shirt, hat, jacket or vest? Well, when the ASFPM Board of Directors came to Madison in February for their annual retreat, they suggested making our 40th anniversary logo available for logo wear and other items. The embroidered logo is now available at ASFPM’s Lands’ End storefront: http://business.landsend.com/store/asfpm/

ASFPM does not make any money on the items you buy at the store. It’s just something nice we want to be able to offer our members.

Special note for the ladies. This logo is 4.5 inches long, and some of the shirts available have "princess seams," which might interfere if you want the logo on the left or right side of your chest.

Note to all: If you'd like to add your name underneath the logo, there is a $6 fee. The way to get your name or title added is that after you proceed to checkout, there is a blue box to the right. Click the link that says, "ENTER SPECIAL NOTES REGARDING YOUR ORDER"

Lands’ End will need the following information:

1. Name or title you want stitched?
2. Script or block lettering?
3. Where you want it placed (more than likely below the logo)?
4. What color you want the name/title to be?

We would love to see a photo of you with the 40th anniversary logo on your clothing, so please send it to michele@floods.org!

INTERESTING FACTS

Five years ago on March 11, a 9.0 magnitude earthquake that hit off the coast of Japan, triggering a tsunami with 30-foot waves that killed 15,893 people. But it’s interesting that centuries-old stones placed all over the islands warned people about tsunami dangers.

On March 21, 2014, President Obama signed into law the Homeowners Flood Insurance Affordability Act. ASFPM has been keeping you informed about national flood policies for 40 years!

The Great Flood of 1913 (March 23-26) affected AL, AR, CT, IL, IN, KY, LA, MD, MA, MS, MO, NH, NJ, NY, NC, OH, PA, TN, VT AND VA. 650 people were killed. It's floods like this that make us remember why ASFPM does what it does.

Main Street in Dayton, Ohio with several feet of water during the flood.
How the CFM® Program Came to Be

Getting the Certified Floodplain Manager program up and running was nothing short of a labor of love. It took years, tons of research, thousands of volunteer hours and lots of collaboration and comparisons before the first exam was even administered at the 1999 ASFPM conference in Portland, Oregon.

In 1992, Jim Owen, chair of ASFPM’s Professional Development Committee at the time, explored a certification program, and Larry Larson, now ASFPM’s director emeritus, thought the concept had merit, so he formed a Certification Task Force to look into the possibility in 1995. “During the same time frame, the Certified Emergency Manager program was being developed with strong support from FEMA,” said John Ivey with the PDC for our Certification Board of Regents. The information gathered from Bonnie Butler, who was with FEMA’s Emergency Management Institute, helped to avoid some of the “pitfalls” identified during development of the CEM program, such as required education and experience to take the certification exam and avoidance of narrative or subjective exam questions.

Also during this time period, the New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas chapters also saw the importance of a certification program and developed state CFM programs.

Ivey said the group believed then as they do today, that the creation of a national CFM program would improve floodplain management nationwide. “A CFM program would provide the avenue needed to educate community floodplain managers and permit officials in floodplain management. When community floodplain officials are educated (certified) and go on to make sound floodplain management decisions, we should see a major reduction in loss of life and damage from flood events.”

In 1999 after the initial exam was given, this nation had its first 66 CFMs through ASFPM’s program. To date, a total of 13,878 CFMs have been certified nationwide and it’s projected that number could rise to 39,712 by 2020.
Mark Riebau, CBOR’s president, said he sees multiple benefits for floodplain management professionals who get their CFM.

He said people with a CFM can improve their chances of finding employment, sitting a Bureau of Labor Statistics report issued this month that indicated people who held a certification had a significantly lower rate of unemployment—2.7% vs 6.1%—and had earnings of approximately 1/3 greater than those who were not.

“Becoming a CFM is the first step in demonstrating a person is qualified to work as a floodplain manager,” Riebau said. “The steps to become a CFM only demonstrate the minimum knowledge of the principles of floodplain management, but experience and the requirement to earn Continuing Education Credits to maintain the CFM credential improves the CFM’s knowledge and qualifications.”

We all know that every community that participates in the National Flood Insurance Program is legally obligated to adopt a floodplain development ordinance to guide new development away from the floodplain, or if unavoidable, be elevated above the base flood elevation. Additionally, every community that participates in the NFIP must designate a floodplain administrator to implement the provisions of the floodplain development ordinance.

Riebau said, “There is no better way for a community to assure itself that whoever they designate as their floodplain administrator is qualified than to require the person be a CFM. There is no better way for participating communities to be confident they are retaining engineering firms to review and improve their flood maps than to hire firms that have CFMs on staff. Planners, engineers, land surveyors and other professionals who are CFMs are far more qualified to provide services within communities that have identified flood hazards than those that are not.”

And once a certification program and exam is up and running, that doesn’t mean anyone can rest on their laurels. Adjustments and improvements are always necessary, as is looking to goals for the future.
The ASFPM CFM program established a policy in which the national exam is approximately 120 multiple choice and true/false questions. Approximately 20 questions require obtaining information from a Flood Insurance Rate Map, Flood Boundary and Floodway Map and Flood Insurance Study. Another 5-10 questions focus on the FEMA Elevation Certificate.

The exam is always being reviewed by the PDC, but in 2009, CBOR and ASFPM decided to go through the rigorous Reliability & Validity process conducted by the Ohio State University. The assessment ensures the program and exam are properly targeted to essential knowledge areas in current practice, constructed to follow best practices and managed to ensure continued credibility and sustainability. It is the same process used by accredited certification programs to ensure quality in their programs and exams.

Riebau said plans for future improvements to the CFM program include expanding the pool of exam questions so we can offer two completely independent exams. This would improve the validity of the exam. We are also investigating the feasibility of putting the exam online to increase the accessibility to the exam and expedite grading the results. We are also making plans to conduct another R & V since it will soon be 10 years since the first one was started with Ohio State University.

CBOR is also considering whether to recommend expanding the prerequisites to becoming a CFM through requiring experience, education or a combination of both to improve floodplain management throughout the nation, he said.

Riebau said, “The most important effort currently underway by CBOR and the EO is to have the Bureau of Labor Statistics recognize “floodplain manager” as a unique Standard Occupational Classification. There are 1,100 distinct occupations recognized by BLS, but neither floodplain manager nor floodplain administrator are among them. BLS is currently in the process of reviewing and validating their list of occupations with a target of 2018 to publish an updated list. Having floodplain manager listed as a separate occupation would be a significant step toward recognizing the job as a profession.”

Improving the program and the status of CFMs is a never ending process, and CBOR is always up for the challenge.
ASFPM, this is your life...in photos!

In celebration of our 40th national conference, behold, photos of conferences past. Thanks to the history keepers, and please forgive the “empty years.”

1977: Chicago, IL
1978: Chicago, IL
1979: St. Paul, MN
1980: New Orleans, LA

1981: Scottsdale, AZ

1982: Madison, WI

The 1993 Great Midwest Flood (May-October) affected IL, IA, KS, MN, MO, NE, ND, SD and WI. More than 1,000 levees failed or were overtopped. Fifty people lost their lives, 54,000 were left homeless, 50,000 homes were destroyed or damaged and 75 communities were completely under water. For almost two months, barge traffic along the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers was at a standstill, 10 commercial airports shut down, as did railroad traffic in virtually all of the Midwest. From Davenport, Iowa, downstream to St. Louis, Missouri, bridges along the Mississippi River were out of commission or inaccessible. It was the same story along the Missouri River. Property damage ranged between $12 and $16 billion. This is why ASFPM does what it does. #40thAnniversary

The Insider May 2016
1983: Sacramento, CA

1984: Portland, ME

1985: New Orleans, Louisiana

The Insider May 2016
1986: Pittsburgh, PA

No, despite what it looks like in this photo, Princess Diana did NOT serve on the ASFPM Board of Directors. The woman front and center is in fact Donna Hall of Kentucky who served as our board secretary.

1987: Seattle, WA

1988: Nashville, TN

1989: Scottsdale, AZ

The Insider May 2016
1990: Asheville, NC

Pretty impressive company to be sandwiched between. From left: Jim Goddard, French Wetmore and Gilbert White at ASFPM’s 1991 national conference in Denver, Colorado.

1991: Denver, CO

1992: Grand Rapids, MI

The Insider May 2016
1993: Atlanta, GA

1994: Tulsa, OK

1995: Portland, ME—From the Mountains to the Sea: Developing Local Capabilities

President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Tennessee Valley Authority Act on May 18, 1933. TVA established a unique problem-solving approach to fulfilling its mission: integrated resource management. Each issue TVA faced — whether it was power production, navigation, flood control, malaria prevention, reforestation or erosion control — was studied in its broadest context. TVA weighed each issue in relation to the whole picture: https://www.tva.gov/About-TVA/Our-History/The-1930s.

Today in flood history. The South Fork dam failed on Friday, May 31, 1889 and unleashed 20 million tons of water that devastated Johnstown, PA. The flood killed 2,209 people.
1996: San Diego—Coast to Coast: 20 years of Progress

1996: San Diego

1997: Little Rock, Arkansas—FPM in a Multi-Faceted World

1997: Little Rock, AR

1998: Milwaukee, WI—Flood Mitigation Technology: Times Are Changing

1998: Milwaukee, WI

(L to R) Dan Accurti, Jerry Louthain and ASFPM Chair Terry Miller.

2000: Austin, TX—A New Beginning in a New Millennium.


Past ASFPM chairs up to 2001.

2003: St. Louis, MO—Lessons Learned: Gateway to Flood Mitigation

2004: Biloxi, Mississippi—Lighting the way to Floodplain Management
2005: Madison, WI—No Adverse Impact: Partnering for Sustainable FPM


2007: Norfolk, VA Charting the Course: New Perspectives in FPM
2008: Reno, NV A Living River Approach to FPM

2009: Orlando, FL Green Works to Reduce Flood Losses
2010: Oklahoma City, OK Building Blocks of FPM

2011: Louisville, KY Flood Risk Management: The Winning Ticket

2012: San Antonio, TX Mission Mitigation
2013: Hartford, CT Remembering the Past – Insuring the Future

2014: Seattle, WA Making Room for Floods & Fish

2015: Atlanta, GA Mitigation on My Mind

Well, it really wouldn’t be an ASFPM national conference without some type of natural disaster, would it? Duane R. Demeritt (@DRDinHiram30141) retweeted this photo after a deluge resulted in a stormwater backup and closure of the Atlanta Downtown Connector.

2016: Grand Rapids, MI Great Lakes – Grand Partners

ASFPM’s 40th Anniversary Series (2016)
2016 obviously was a monumental year for ASFPM. Our organization is 40 years old and Grand Rapids marked our 40th annual gathering. ASFPM Executive Director Chad Berginnis honored all the people who have built ASFPM into an exceptional organization, while slides from the last 40 years of conferences ran. Watch the slideshow here. Great memories!