FLOOD RISK MANAGEMENT

April 2014

Policy

Robust flood risk management strategies need to be underpinned by good science and technology and supported by ongoing research and analysis. Work on such areas as the behaviour of natural systems, river pattern information, the dynamics of flooding, and the links between watercourses, terrestrial and coastal environments needs to be nationally co-ordinated and resourced. The major funders of research need to be directed to give a higher priority to flood related research than is currently the case.

Improved awareness, knowledge and expertise will continue to develop in an ad hoc manner and duplication of effort is likely to proliferate in the absence of national leadership and guidance. As a means of facilitating the requisite level of leadership and guidance, it is recommended a national leadership forum be established. This would include representatives of central and local government agencies and key stakeholder groups. The forum would be resourced to enable it to co-opt expertise in specific areas. The forum would also have a role in promulgating best practice examples, identifying research needs, facilitating stakeholder dialogue, promoting discussion on inappropriately located physical assets, and establishing potential funding requirements.

Explanation

Following the extensive flooding of 2004 (lower North island and Bay of Plenty), Government decided to review the current state of flood risk management. A comprehensive written review has now been released[1], and despite noting that flooding is the country's most common natural hazard and over a hundred cities and towns are located on flood plains, the report continues to suggest that flood management essentially be devolved to local government. The review found practice at that level to be variable, the level of flood risk could not be stated with any accuracy, and there were capacity and affordability issues.

Prior to the introduction of the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA), the then Water and Soil Directorate (WSD) was beginning work on an integrated policy guide for managing flood risks at the local level. In 1988, however, WSD was disestablished as part of central bureaucracy reforms and flood risk responsibilities passed to the newly created Ministry for the Environment (MfE). Policy decisions at the time meant that MfE did not pursue the flood risk work initiated by WSD and at the same time subsidies to local government for flood control works were progressively phased out.

The result has been that since that time both regional councils and territorial local authorities have, with varying success, had to develop flood risk planning separately and in the absence of any national guidance on an integrated approach. It is also of significance that the disestablishment of centrally funded bodies has seen a loss of expertise and the availability of knowledge and skills, particularly to smaller authorities.

It is clear that national guidance and support will be required to actually achieve universal and effective planning and management outcomes.

Many of the communities exposed to flood risk are constrained in terms of knowledge and skills availability, the affordability of flood management techniques, such as flood forecasting,

[1] *Meeting the Challenges of Future Flooding in New Zealand,* MfE and The Flood Risk Management & River Control Review Steering Group, MfE, August 2008

and access to funding for capital works. The report of the 2007 Local Government Rates Inquiry included among its recommendations the introduction of a contestable “Infrastructure Equalisation Fund” to provide financial assistance to councils and communities in the development and maintenance of “three waters” infrastructure. It would seem appropriate to investigate the establishment of a similar fund specifically targeted at the implementation of effective flood risk management.

In many catchments Crown owned lands and assets are an integral part of the catchment. Note “Crown” in this context is also intended to include State Owned Enterprises, thus “assets” includes roads, railways, bridges, pylons, etc. Tensions have arisen around participation and contribution, both in terms of land management and financially, when flood management actions are required. It has been suggested that ratepayers, who may not be the majority landowner in a catchment, are forced to carry a disproportionate burden of the costs resulting from such actions. A greater degree of responsibility and involvement is required by the Crown as a major landowner if the desired level of awareness and effectiveness of flood management is to be achieved.