

PREPARED FOR HURRICANES?

Missouri flood lessons for Florida

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The first day of spring is just behind us. The sun has moved slightly north of the equator on its march toward the Tropic of Cancer. The Northern Hemisphere will receive a little more solar energy today than it did yesterday, and a little more tomorrow than today. As the months pass, sea surface temperature rises with the summer heating, and the ocean stores energy to generate hurricanes.

Yes, another hurricane season looms. But isn't it too early to start thinking of hurricanes, you might be saying? The truth is, we should never stop thinking of them. When hurricane season arrives June 1, it will be too late.

It is not hurricanes that grab the headlines today, but flooding along the Meramec River, Mo., in small towns such as Pacific, Eureka, Valley Park and Arnold. Floods are a different natural hazard than hurricanes, but similar approaches are used to plan for and recover from their effects.

The evening news showed a mayor of one of the flood-ravaged communities wondering why the government had not built them a levee. A citizen of that same community was distraught because her dream home was nearly submerged. It seems obvious that neither the mayor nor the citizen had taken the proper steps weeks, months or even years ago to prepare for a natural disaster that, while not a certainty, was at least a possibility, if not a probability. This is not to pick on a single community, mayor or resident, but rather to learn lessons from their predicament.

Did the mayor or other political bodies look into management strategies other than levees? How about zoning, land-use planning, relocation? See the stories about relocation efforts after the 1993 Midwest floods -- Valmeyer and Grafton, Ill.; Cape Girardeau, Mo.; and many others. It is a lesson 15 years old, but unheeded.

Funds may have been more readily available for relocation rather than levees, for something that is a permanent solution. Did we not learn from Katrina that levees are not a sure thing?

Check out how some of the levees in nearby communities fared during the recent floods - Peerless Park Levee in St. Louis County, or Neelyville in Butler County, Mo.

And what of the poor person who lost her home? Sad, to be sure, but could she tell you in what flood zone her property is located? Could she, off the top of her head, give you the BFE? Does she even know that BFE stands for "base flood elevation?" It is the elevation

to which flood waters are expected to rise during the base (100-year) flood, a measure that can be used for determining elevation or flood-proofing of homes.

Does she know what a FIRM is? Did she inquire with her community about these things? Does the community have a flood insurance study on file and available for review? Did the mortgage company or bank look into these things before making the loan?

And could her mayor answer these same questions? Is the mayor familiar with the Federal Emergency Management Agency's mitigation directorate? Has he contacted the agency to see how it can help or, rather, how they could have helped plan for today's floods?

Now back to hurricanes, which result in a different type of flooding, and accompanying severe winds, but the same flood-zone questions apply. Now is the time to assess the potential risks of your property and your community. What flood zone do you live in? What is the BFE of your site? Is your house built to hurricane-code specifications, or better? How about your neighbor? If your house is well-built, but your neighbor's house (shed, garage or other outbuilding) is not, you potentially have a bunch of missiles aimed straight at you.

While the Midwest is recovering from one type of natural disaster, let's ask ourselves if we are ready for what is sure to come this summer and early fall. Let's begin examining the potential hazards to our homes, homesites, neighborhoods and communities. Let's also start making plans for the upcoming hurricane season.

While we are doing that, let's keep an eye on the growing minutes and hours of daylight over the next three months. Each additional minute of daylight brings an additional minute's worth of solar heating to the North Atlantic -- more fuel for the fire.