

Temporary waiver will be issued

FEMA official frowns on flood proposal

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by John Draper

SKAGIT COUNTY — Even though it is still unclear what will be done about a downriver floodway designation, residents here will be able to shore up their federal flood insurance policies, according to a federal official.

Chuck Steele, director of natural and technological hazards for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), told county officials on a visit to Mount Vernon last week that a waiver will be issued until the Skagit floodway problem is solved.

In most cases a floodway — the area where flood waters will likely travel — must be designated before a city or county can move from the first to second phase of the federal flood insurance program.

The whole floodway issue here is so muddled, however, FEMA officials are going to waive this requirement for

Skagit County, Steele explained.

"We've had a horrendous time with the floodway here," he commented.

If Skagit County citizens do get under the second phase of the federal flood insurance program the increase in coverage will be marked.

Currently, the maximum amount of coverage available is \$35,000. Under the second, or regular, phase of the insurance, the coverage increases to \$185,000.

"We wouldn't want to see people go through another flood season with only \$35,000 of coverage," Steele said, adding there are \$57 million worth of federal flood insurance policies in force in the county.

Before people here can make this jump in coverage, FEMA must go through some "due process" matters, Steele said.

"It's our problem," he said. "We will address it as quickly as possible."

In the mean time, FEMA officials will

continue to meet with local officials to settle the floodway problem, he said.

However, the locally-devised solution to the problem, a limited-density floodway, is too simplistic to do the job here, he said.

The proposal, created by the citizen Skagit River Flood Control Committee, states the floodway problem could be solved by limiting the density of development on the floodplain. The committee's report set forth a development density of 25 percent, but committee members have said this figure was picked arbitrarily and isn't necessarily the best percentage.

If FEMA accepts this proposal, it will only be after some "embellishment," Steele said. Don Nelson, county flood engineer, said FEMA wants regulations on dike and road construction and landfill development as part of any limited density floodway proposal they accept.

Steele explained FEMA is wary of the limited density method because the lay of the land doesn't lend itself to it. He said a limited density floodway does not pertain to a delta situation like downriver Skagit County.

A designated floodway is possible for the upriver area, he said, because the floodwaters would be confined to the valley. Yet the wide-open down river has no such clear path.

"Our scientific methods for deltas aren't as refined," he said, explaining FEMA's frustration with the downriver floodway problem.

During the visit with city and county officials, Steele and the other FEMA officials listed the available options other than the limited density method.

Most of these options were previously dismissed, though, by the Skagit River Flood Control Committee in their limited density recommendation.