

DOE takes issue with flood levels

By MARK MORROW
Staff Writer

OLYMPIA — The state Department of Ecology has appealed the federal Flood Insurance Study findings on elevations in the Skagit flood plain, DOE officials announced Tuesday.

Jerry Louthain, resources management supervisor for the DOE, said the action — coming on the last day of a 90-day appeal period — is the first time ever for the DOE to appeal such findings by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

FEMA's flood figures and maps, released last August, predicted flood elevations lower than those forecast as far back as 1967 by the Army Corps of Engineers. FEMA's numbers were prepared by the East Coast firm of Dames and Moore, which used a system of "averaging the risk" to determine elevations in the event of a 100-year flood.

DOE officials disagree with the conclusions reached in FEMA's study and — depending on how FEMA handles the appeal — the upshot could be more restrictions on development in the flood plain.

"We will continue to use the Corps' numbers," Louthain said.

Burlington City Supervisor Stan Kersey said it's too early to know whether the DOE appeal is bad news for Burlington.

"I'm not surprised," Kersey said.

Louthain said DOE took issue on a "technical and scientific" basis with FEMA's scenario on distribution of floodwaters.

In effect, the FEMA story has the 100-year flood breaking out of the Skagit river channel upstream from Burlington and flowing partially through town until it hits the freeway and splits.

"FEMA says there will be no

overtopping anywhere from upstream of Mount Vernon all the way to the south end of Mount Vernon," Louthain said. "But the Corps and DOE say we can get a (levy) failure anywhere. History has proven we can. Consequently, we get higher elevations throughout the area."

In one example, the FEMA study would have no floodwaters at the intersection of Anacortes Street and Fairhaven in Burlington. The Corps version endorsed by DOE would have three feet of water at the same location, Louthain said.

A difference of several feet would be evident in portions of downtown Mount Vernon near the levies, Louthain said. The disparity in the FEMA and DOE elevations would become less as you move away from the levies.

FEMA official Chuck Steele, however, said the Corps elevations are not necessarily more valid than those adopted by FEMA.

"You can't have those breaks everywhere," Steele said. "An appeal might be a good thing. We need to get the air cleared."

If adopted, the DOE elevations could create extra problems for local residents interested in getting federal flood insurance.

"Your rates are based on the level you build at," Louthain said.

FEMA has already said the city of Burlington may be able to go from an emergency flood insurance program to a regular program. Under the emergency program, a single home could apply for only \$35,000 worth of federal flood insurance. Under the regular program, however, the homeowner could apply for \$150,000 more, or a total of \$185,000. DOE's appeal, if suc-

Continued from Page 1

cessful, would throw all that into question, Louthain said.

Burlington had until November 1984 to create an ordinance in line with FEMA's elevations, Louthain said. However, the DOE appeal will delay that.

"We don't want people to get damaged, based on these figures which we think are too low. We feel it's more important to resolve this than to get into the business of selling flood insurance," Louthain said.

Higher elevations would also

affect the DOE's willingness to issue permits inside the flood control zone, Louthain said. The DOE has delegated that responsibility to Skagit County in the unincorporated areas, but has kept it for itself inside the cities, he said.

Louthain said his office still has not received an application for a flood zone permit for the proposed Cascade Mall, but he said the Environmental Impact Statement for the project was written with the Corps elevations in mind anyway.

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