



FEMA

Mitigation

...in Wisconsin

Mitigation
(mit.i.ga.tion) n. —
measures taken to re-
duce adverse impacts.

"Mitigation focuses on breaking the cycle of disaster damage, reconstruction, and repeated damage."

FEMA.gov Web site

The following grants are available in Wisconsin:

- The Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) provides a percentage of total disaster assistance funds for mitigation measures to be implemented during the immediate recovery *after a disaster*.
- The Flood Mitigation Assistance (FMA) Program provides funding to states and communities for measures that reduce or eliminate the long-term risk of *flood damage* to buildings, manufactured homes and other structures insured under the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP).
- The Pre-Disaster Mitigation (PDM) Program provides competitive grants to states, tribal governments and local governments for cost-effective hazard mitigation that complements a comprehensive mitigation program.

Soldiers Grove Reflects on Moving

Relocating downtown was the best flood protection

In August 2007, the biggest flood in the history of Soldiers Grove came roaring through the village. The Kickapoo River quickly topped the levees and water didn't recede for about 10 days. Soldiers Grove escaped serious flood damage, however, as the town center had been moved uphill years earlier.

Residents experienced floods in 1907, '12, '17, '35, '51 and the "big one" in 1978. From 1969 to 2007, the state had 25 federally declared flood disasters in 38 years. The flood of record in 2007 inflicted the worst damage in the state just 10 miles downstream in Gays Mills.

"The Kickapoo can turn into a wild river. I don't know how we escaped all the floods without loss of life. We had a lot of good people; fire crews, emergency management crews out there working evacuations and rescues," said Jerry Moran, Crawford County Sheriff. "Each time there was very little advance warning. People woke up at night with 3 to 4 inches of water already in



Downtown Soldiers Grove was underwater during the flood of 1978. Photo by Betty France

their homes." Moran has lived in Soldiers Grove for 37 years. His dad and mother were dairy farmers who retired to the village.

Local debate about what to do about the flooding began to swell in the mid-60s when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers proposed an upstream dam and a new levee for the village. Environmentalists argued against the dam. Towns people thought the cost was too high; maintenance of the levee was going to cost the village nearly all of its

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Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) mitigation representatives David Colclough and Patrick Knotts answer questions and give out informational brochures at the Richland County Fair as part of FEMA's outreach program. **Details on page 2.**



Reaching Out to the Community

Fair-goers and shoppers get a taste of mitigation

Whether it was at a county fair, community festival, or home improvement store, southern Wisconsin residents were treated to much more than food-on-a-stick, local crafts or business as usual. In the aftermath of severe storms and flooding that struck the state, representatives from FEMA set up information booths to inform residents on how to make their homes stronger, answer their questions about disaster assistance, and direct them to available help.

FEMA Hazard Mitigation Advisers, Community Relations teams, and U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) representatives put a face to the acronyms. They asked passersby about their flood and wind damage from the August 2007 storms, explained programs and gave out brochures.

The specialists in hazard mitigation promoted steps people could take to eliminate or reduce damage from future disasters. Their outreach in Wisconsin is one of the ways Wisconsin Emergency Management and FEMA responded to assist people affected by the disaster. The teams set up under fluorescent bulbs at home improvement stores, striped tents on fairgrounds, and the skies over town centers amidst local festivities.

“Our outreach programs put a face to FEMA,” said Gary Witt, Mitigation Outreach Team Lead. “The best part is the chance to meet people. If these people have a problem, we can help straighten it out.”

The educational efforts at local stores and events touched hundreds of Wisconsin residents, many of whom had not registered for assistance. Community Relations team members found that people at community celebrations felt more comfortable asking questions and talking about their damage. By tag-teaming with mitigation specialists, they were better able to help those with damaged homes apply for disaster assistance.



TOP FEMA Community Relations Specialist Sandra Hinkle hands out information on available disaster assistance at the Richland County Fair.

BOTTOM FEMA set up shop at the Vernon County Fair in Viroqua as part of their outreach program.



Mitigation team members talked with nearly 3,000 visitors during the six-week tour through the hills and valleys of southern Wisconsin on subjects ranging from elevating appliances above the reach of flood waters to building a safe room to use in case of tornados. With all the information dispensed at the fairs and 11 home improvement center stops in seven communities, the outreach efforts should help residents be better

prepared the next time the area is inundated by rain and floodwaters.



To read more Mitigation Best Practices articles, log on to:

www.fema.gov/plan/prevent/bestpractices/index.shtm



Residents walk by Ray's Café after the 1951 flooding in Gays Mills.

Photo by Betty France



Soldiers Grove is shown in its new location along US Hwy 61, relocated to avoid flooding. New nursing home is at left front; business district front and center. *Photo by Jerry Quebe*

Soldiers Grove Move Uphill Saved Businesses in 2007

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annual tax revenues. The move of the downtown, surrounded on three sides by the river, to higher ground began to make financial sense.

"Moving the town took a lot of planning and a lot of groups working together. It got to the point it wasn't feasible to stay there any longer," said John Young, a local merchant since 1960.

By 1975, a small Comprehensive Employment and Training Act grant paid for a relocation coordinator. Thomas Hirsch was hired.

"Soldiers Grove was faced with a dilemma," Hirsch says. "Either there had to be a comprehensive revitalization effort or the Main Street, and the rest of the community, would die, with or without flood protection works."

By 1976 the village took the unprecedented move of passing a resolution that supported relocation to avoid future flood disasters.

The flood of July 1978 made things happen. "At one point, during the flood of 1978, I was on the bridge as it swayed. I saw instant waterfalls at the end of the street and butane tanks floating up and down. It was really a mess," recalled Young. His store flooded and inventory in the basement was a total loss.

"I did not necessarily favor the move at first," said Moran, whose father was president of the village in 1978. "The move meant a lot of money and debt for the village. The 1978 flood com-

pletely changed my mind. There were close to 40 businesses down there that were flooded out and about 10 to 12 homes were really destroyed."

On July 7, 1978, a federal disaster declaration made federal funds available to floodproof the village. Local planners convinced state and federal officials that moving the town was the best floodproofing. They eventually received their first federal grant of \$900,000 from HUD Secretary's Discretionary Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) to get the project moving – acquire flood prone properties, clear the area, demolish old properties and rebuild the town uphill.

By 1983 the relocation project costing \$6 million in public funds was done. According to Hirsch, in 1979 the village wanted to "help the U.S. reduce its dependency on foreign oil" so the village incorporated solar heating in the new buildings, subsequently dubbed *Solar Village*.

"Since the buildings have solar heating they are insulated a lot better. If I get a good day of sun, I'll get three days of heat," Young said.

Locals have witnessed a moderate population growth, and the addition of new businesses and the expansion of older ones.

"If Soldiers Grove had stayed in the floodplain it would have been a stagnant community; it would have still existed, but stagnant," said Moran. "All the new businesses would not have happened if we were still there."

In 2007, Soldiers Grove's central riverside municipal park and campgrounds, where the downtown once stood, received little damage. The *Solar Village* uphill was unscathed.

"The recent flood devastation reinforced that we did the right thing. I don't ever want to go through another flood like 1978," said Young.

"Common sense tells me the move was the right thing to do. All we have to do is drive over to Gays Mills and look at what they are facing, the same things we faced years ago. They are having village meetings to decide what to do to help reduce flood impact," said Moran.

Moran said he was proud to be part of the relocation project. "It was a huge project for a small community and it was successful," Moran said. "What else can you ask for?"



A case study of the floodplain relocation project at Soldiers Grove, titled "Come Rain, Come Shine" is available from:

Bureau of Water Regulation
and Zoning

WI Dept. of Natural Resources
PO Box 7921
Madison WI 53707

Moving Highway Shop Improves Disaster Response

Up until 2003, before, during and after flooding, employees of the Crawford County Highway Shop in Gays Mills spent days and hours moving vehicles, heavy equipment and computers, sandbagging, and raising things off the ground, all in an effort to protect their facility from rising waters.

"Today things are a lot better," said Dennis J. Pelock, Crawford County Highway Commissioner as he looked out from his new facility on a hilltop near Seneca, one of the highest points in the county at 1,231 feet above sea level.

During past floods, the old concrete block building was inaccessible for as long as a week. Phone calls from residents went unanswered and staff was often on the wrong side of the flooding Kickapoo River from the equipment they needed.

"The floods put us out of business for a while. With the mechanic shop under water, there was no place to fix equipment," Pelock added. "We couldn't properly respond to public needs. We didn't have a home base, we operated out of the car, truck, whatever."

Following two flood events in 2000 when the Kickapoo River overflowed and in 2001 when the Mississippi River flooded the area, Crawford County applied for and secured funds from Wisconsin Emergency Management through the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Relocating the facility was underway.

Crawford County spent an estimated \$2.7 million from various



The Crawford County Highway Shop in its new location, 1,231 feet above sea level.
Photo by Don Greenwood

grants to fund the relocation project which involved acquisition of the original property, demolishing and clearing the property, and rebuilding out of the floodplain. The HMGP funds of \$700,000 were used to acquire the floodplain property, demolish the original building and move equipment and supplies to the new site. FEMA funded 75 percent of the HMGP total and the county and state contributed the remaining 25 percent. Wisconsin Emergency Management administered the funds.

The move required some special work. At the new site, the county had to prepare a Farmland Impact Study. At the old site, contaminants and solvents in the soil from previous tenants required an extensive cleanup project to reduce the risk of washing contaminants into area waterways.

"We were able to get the site cleaned up and closed before receiving any eligible grant funds," said Pelock.

"The central location, has made it a lot easier to send equipment out to

necessary areas and it doesn't take as long to reach different parts of the county," added Pelock.

In August 2007 Gays Mills received more than 12 inches of rain, and the highest flood waters in the valley's history did not recede for two weeks. The new shop remained high and dry while Gays Mills was inundated.

The county had converted the old Gays Mills location site into a parking lot for the nearby community center. It is also utilized for special outdoor events. Crawford County owns and maintains the lot.

"This mitigation project has helped us perform public safety duties and serve the general public," Pelock said. "When something happens during a storm, we can immediately respond. We don't have to worry about the shop. We are located out of the floodplain and don't have to worry about flooding."



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www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/water/wm/dsfm/flood/