

RX DISCOVERY 2011: Kotzebue, Floodplain Administrator Interview

Meeting Notes

February 2, 2011, 4:00 pm MT, interview via conference call

Attendees: Jim Balcerek, FPA, Kotzebue
Matthew Johnson, STARR Discovery NFIP Specialist
Bridget Belliveau, STARR Discovery GIS Coordinator
James Patanio, STARR Discovery Coastal Specialist
James Huffines, STARR Discovery Meeting Leader

Hi Jim - thanks for taking the time to talk with us today. As you already know, FEMA's new Discovery process involves learning as much as possible about selected watersheds so that we can help the local officials identify the best projects for FEMA funding and implementation. Our goal with the interviews is to confirm the data we've collected so far with you, to find out other information about your community's flood-related issues, and to answer any questions you have about Discovery as best as we can.

Did you have a chance to look over the Fact Sheet, map, and contacts list we sent? How did the data look to you?

The presidentially declared disaster data may be inaccurate with regard to landslides and avalanches. Fires, storms, landslides, paddle surges, coastal erosion, and freezing do apply to the area. Environmentally sensitive areas would include critical species (polar bears, seals), and numerous wetlands are present. The presidentially declared disaster data appears to be statewide declarations.

As you see on the Fact Sheet, we found that the state of Alaska has been involved in several presidentially-declared disasters. Does your community have any flooding-related educational efforts or special programs to support folks who need flooding-related information or support?

There are pamphlets available for people, however there are no special programs in place at this time.

One indicator that an area may need a new study is a significant number of Letters of Map Amendment (LOMAs) along a flooding source. We found there were not any Letters of Map Change (LOMCs) in the community – does that sound correct?

There have been no LOMCs done; a lot should have been done but did not occur.

We also saw that there were no Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) projects. Is this correct?

There may have been grant funds for storm surge beach erosion around 1997. Jim will attempt to retrieve more information about that project.

Following-up on mitigation: Are there other projects that you think are needed in your community? Where? Why? Would the community be willing to share costs for such a project? Have you worked with the State to request FEMA funds for the projects?

A DOT project includes storm surge protection for Shore Avenue in the form of a seawall. The current phase does not extend the entire length needed, so the second phase could include another mile to the north, to approximately Minerva, Minnie, or Lake Streets.

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I saw that there were no repetitive loss properties in the community - properties that had experienced flood problems enough to require repeat claims. Is this correct?

Yes, this is correct. Most people do not have flood insurance. There have been some damages on Shore Avenue. There may be a property on the lagoon that has seen damage.

It looks like there were no claims made outside of the mapped floodplain. Is this correct?

No claims have been filed to the best of his knowledge.

We collected levee data from the National Levee Database. From our understanding, Alaska's levee inventory has not yet been added to this database. Do you know of substantial levees or other flood control structures in Kotzebue?

The new seawall being constructed will protect Shore Avenue. No other flood control structures are known.

Following-up on levees: FEMA's requirement for levees is that communities provide documentation that the levee is compliant with the Code of Federal Regulations, Section 65.10, in order for the levee to be shown on new FIRMs as providing protection from the base flood. If these levees were determined to not be compliant with the requirements, what would be the impact on the residents, for example if the area behind a levee is below the BFE and the area was remapped as a SFHA?

N/A

We found that there are no tribal entities in the watershed, does that sound right to you?

No actual reservations. There is a significant native population in the area and the native town of Kotzebue. Land is held by a regional or local native corporation; there no reservations in Alaska.

We did not find any Environmentally Sensitive Areas, like wetlands, or coastal areas requiring protection. Do you know of any that we may have missed?

Wetlands are abundant in the area. Polar bears and seals may be in the area and are listed as critical species.

FEMA has a database of best available topographic data and that shows Kotzebue does not have any LiDAR datasets. Do you know of any LiDAR data collection projects in the area?

FEMA has collected aerial imagery rather than update the FIRM map during the last round of FEMA funding to the area. Taunnie Boothby, Alaska NFIP Coordinator has indicated there was new topo collected, which Jim initially agreed, however later indicated it was aerial imagery rather than topo.

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FEMA has been documenting areas where new studies may be needed in a data system called Coordinated Needs Management Strategy (CNMS). On the map we sent to you, these mapping needs are shown in red. There is only one area highlighted. Is this consistent with your thoughts on new study needs?

The City of Kotzebue has been filled and/or regraded since the original studies were conducted. Jim recommended that the priority areas extend from the southern coast at the waste water treatment plant to include the town proper, as well as the lagoon. Basically all the detailed mapping shown on the effective FIRM should be restudied since the conditions have changed so much since the initial mapping.

Does the community have funding that they could contribute to a new study?

No funds have been allocated for new studies.

Are you aware of any existing studies, maybe completed by the community or developers or the DOT? IF YES, We need to have those studies in hand before the Discovery meeting. Can you send us either a pdf or hard copy?

DOT probably has studies for the new seawall construction on Shore Avenue. Also, the airport has plans to extend the runway into the sea, which should require a flood study. Follow up with the DOT and the airport for existing study information because Jim does not have that information on hand.

As you probably know, FEMA requires a mitigation plan for any community to be eligible to receive disaster assistance (funding). Our records indicate your plan is good until 2013, does that sound correct to you?

Yes.

We have collected a lot of GIS data, some from the Alaska Geospatial Clearinghouse website which has helped a lot. We appreciate including more local GIS layers like transportation layers, political boundaries, land use data, parcel data, building footprints, essential facility data, inundation areas from historic flooding, and coastal data. Do you have local data and are you willing to provide that to us for the Discovery meeting?

No, there is not a GIS presence in Kotzebue. There may be some sporadic data here and there but nothing organized.

Do you know of any recent transportation projects, like replaced bridges or culverts, or highway reconstruction, which were in the floodplain? Many times transportation projects are not quickly reflected in the flood maps. Can you tell us the location and date?

The ongoing Shore Avenue project and some airport construction have occurred. There was an aqueduct suspended over the lagoon that was recently removed. It was replaced with a truss system supported by built up berms.

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Are there areas of rapid growth or development that may have affected the water runoff or areas that are close to floodplains? Were LOMRs performed as part of the development?

N/A

As part of Discovery, FEMA wants to support local officials in educating their residents about flood risk. We would like to ask a few questions about your community's communication strategies. If new flood studies were performed for the high priority areas we discussed earlier, what is your sense of how the residents would receive the new flood study results and associated flood maps?

The city and residents will welcome new and accurate flood information. They will have public meetings and announcements for the community as how to get information.

Because no two communities are alike and come in so many types and sizes, they all have unique outreach needs. We collected demographic data and found that [8% non-English speaker pop, 71% native pop, etc]. Does this seem correct to you? Have you found any particular type of outreach that works better to communicate risk to these communities?

They work hand in hand with the native people and the borough, which support the native language. Everyone cooperates to communicate information.

Each community has unique opportunities and challenges for outreach due to their local floodplain management programs and the local conditions that impact that community. The community appears to have unique flooding issues. What is the current awareness level about this issue among your citizens? With FEMA's help, would you be willing to serve as a Subject Matter Expert on this topic?

Yes. The residents are very aware of storm surge flooding. They have lived with it for a long time.

We sent a list of local contacts we would like to notify about any future projects. Could you take a look and let us know:

a. Is the name/contact info correct?

Looks correct.

b. Is any group or organization missing?

Looks correct.

c. Do you anticipate any concerns from anyone on the list? What would they be?

No concerns other than achieving the goals the community would like to see accomplished.

d. Do you know any of these people personally? How often do you meet/speak with them?

Jim sees people who work for the city and borough on a regular basis.

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- e. Does the Mayor/Executive's Public Affairs office have these groups on his/her mailing list?***

He is not sure, but he thinks he will have most of them. The mayor is part-time.

- f. Are there regular meetings where these stakeholders meet where a status on this project might be appropriate to add to the agenda?***

Yes. Planning commission meetings, city council meetings, borough planning meetings, and joint meetings with the city and borough happen on a regular basis. A joint planning meeting is scheduled on February 18th where projects like this are regularly discussed.

- g. If we provided information about the project to you/the Mayor/Executive, would your community be willing to send a letter inviting the community to a meeting or providing project update(s)? (You could get Community Rating System (CRS) points for outreach)***

If correspondence is sent to the mayor, it will likely be sent to Rick Hohnbaum, City Manager or Jim Balcerek, City Planner. The mayor is part time.

At the end of a Risk MAP project, FEMA will provide you with new data and risk assessment tools that will help you and your residents better understand and visualize your risks. With customizable outreach tools and templates provided by FEMA, would you and/or your community be willing to take a proactive approach in educating people who live and work in your community about their risk and the steps they can take to protect themselves?

Yes.

Would you be willing to have a future call/meeting to discuss the community's capabilities and support any resources that may be needed from FEMA?

Yes.

Who else should we include on that call that has knowledge about existing community outreach? Specifically, we would discuss things like website information and email lists; mailings to citizens and key stakeholders; press releases and media briefings; public meetings; and other outreach efforts.

Everyone is already on the contact list that should be notified. Tom Ukallaysaaq, Planning Director of the borough, has a well established outreach program. It would also be helpful to contact Noah Maylor, Deputy Director of the Kotzebue IRA, a native organization, who is from the native village of Kotzebue. Jim will send his contact information.

Jim, do you know of a good place to hold the meeting? We don't have a location yet set. There should be 3 STARR folks attending, Taunnie Boothby, and John Chase, Coastal Hazard Specialist with the Northwest Arctic Borough has confirmed he will attend.

Jim suggested the city council chambers or there is a large conference table at the public works department. If larger accommodations are needed, the borough chamber may be available. Jim will touch base with the borough, to invite them, and inquire about a meeting location.

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That's about all the questions that we have. Is there anything else you think we should know or include on our map?

No.

Thank you so much for spending the time to talk with us.