FEMA Faces Challenges in Soggy Washington

Local News

Posted by: David Haviland

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Olympia, WA - Washington's heavy seasonal rains often mean flooded homes and businesses, particularly in the Puget Sound region. Conservation groups say much of the damage is preventable, but that Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) policies actually encourage development in floodplains.

The rainy seasons have brought 14 federal flood disaster declarations to Washington in the last 20 years, with almost 60 deaths and over $1.4 billion in damages.

Dan Siemann, senior environmental policy specialist in the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) Pacific Region office, says builders and homeowners in flood-prone areas just buy low-cost flood insurance from FEMA. He says that doesn't solve the flooding problems - for homeowners or for native fish species - and FEMA has paid out so many claims that it is deeply in debt.

"It's bad from the point of view of the federal budget and taxpayers, but it's also bad from the point of view of people who think they are allowed and can live safely in flood plains because their policies say they can - yet at the same time, it's putting them in harm's way then the flood comes."

Siemann says levee systems significantly alter rivers, and have failed in most of Washington's major floods, causing more damage and expensive repairs. He says keeping floodplains intact is a public safety factor, and it's also critical for salmon habitat.

"As you build in floodplains, you're actually constricting the area where the flood waters can go. So, that makes the waters go faster, increases the velocity, increases the scour, increases the erosion. Altogether, it's actually very, very harmful for salmon."

He adds FEMA missed a September deadline to comply with a court-required plan to improve its policies and mitigate flood damage that has already occurred. FEMA says it has met some of the requirements and is working on others - but NWF is likely to ask a judge to rule on whether the agency's progress is sufficient.