

vantage point



Another Chance at CFS?

The idea of a national Certified Floodplain Surveyor (CFS) program surfaced about midway through the tenure of the first Technical Mapping Advisory Council to FEMA (late 1990s). At that time, FEMA staff on the Council fully acknowledged the importance of surveyors in updating maps and as having first hand information regarding relationships between true ground, lowest floor, and Base Flood Elevations.

This led to the concept of Certified Floodplain Surveyors, who would be specially trained in and had passed an examination on the rationale behind and completion of applications for Letters of Map Amendment (which provide better technical data than the existing flood maps and reports). One of the benefits to be extended to these CFSs would be expedited review of their LOMA applications, in five days rather than the regulatorily established 60. (Furthermore, improved understanding and knowledge translate to reductions in work time and liability.) The benefit to FEMA would be receipt of better technical data and fewer errors in the applications to be reviewed—the latter meaning less expenditure on application reviews. The benefits to the public would be both the expedited correction of maps and the improvement of overall map quality, as that better technical data would be incorporated into later map versions.

Several states volunteered to host the pilot program; North Carolina won that host role due to its position as a Cooperating Technical Partner with FEMA and strong support from within its own surveying and floodplain management communities. The first trainings were conducted by one of FEMA's contractors while the North Carolina Society of Surveyors hosted the multi-day events and managed the application and renewal processes.

After a few years, however, FEMA found that not a lot of applications for expedited

LOMAs were coming in, and thereby decided that the program was not worth its investment either to support continued involvement in North Carolina or to expand the program to other states. (That investment to establish the initial training program material was about \$30,000.) With the introduction of eLOMA, FEMA believed that the CFS program was no longer as necessary.

But the desire for an expanded CFS program has not died within the surveying community, particularly as eLOMA does not accommodate every LOMA application. With recent renewed interest in the National Flood Insurance Program throughout the country from insurers, property owners, and legislators, the ability to serve clients quickly and knowledgeably to correct maps and moderate flood insurance premiums is once again in the forefront.

FEMA ceased all involvement in North Carolina CFS program five or six years ago, although it does advise its Region IV contractor responsible for reviewing LOMA applications that those from North Carolina CFSs are to be reviewed in the expedited five-day window. Meanwhile, the state's CFS program is administered through a collaboration of the emergency management and risk management divisions of state agencies with the North Carolina Society of Surveyors.

Gary Thompson of the NC Geodetic Survey (NCGS) administers the CFS program and proctors the exams, while John Gerber of the NC State Floodplain Management division is responsible for initial training and CFS renewal training. The cost of maintaining and operating the CFS program comes from the outreach budget of North Carolina's floodplain management division. This is in part funded through a portion of the fee attached to the filing of all Deeds of Trust, as a percentage of that fee goes to different programs within State government. The

North Carolina Society of Surveyors provides the training site and notifications.

If serious about expanding the program beyond North Carolina, we need a strong collaborative commitment between state surveying societies and state floodplain managers. NSPS has begun positive discussions with the Association of State Flood Plain Managers (ASFPM) as a possible partner in the endeavor to take the CFS program nationwide. While North Carolina has offered its administrative and operational guidelines of how the CFS program works there, the program may have to look a little different in different states due to differing resources (staff and budgets) and differing organizational hierarchies. While indicating a complication, it doesn't translate to impossibility.

Numerous details must be explored in planning expansion of the program, even with a model from North Carolina. One example is the exam itself. Currently theirs has a "national" portion and a "state-specific" portion. Should the CFS exam be made entirely national in scope, creating a true national certification? Or should each state issue its own certification?

In forming "next step" plans, we will have to work thoughtfully through the "who", "what", "why", "how", and "how much" aspects. Who will the partners be in each state? What roles will they play, and what will motivate each to commit to the CFS program? How much will it cost (in dollars, in hours) to initiate and administer the program? Most importantly, how committed are we to following through from planning stages to implementation and continued operation? ■

Wendy Lathrop is licensed as a Professional Land Surveyor in NJ, PA, DE, and MD, and has been involved since 1974 in surveying projects ranging from construction to boundary to environmental land use disputes. She is a Professional Planner in NJ, and a Certified Floodplain Manager through ASFPM.