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Flood plan needs action

\$300M required to avert repeat of 2005 disaster

Renata D'Aliesio, Calgary Herald

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More than \$300 million is needed to address Alberta's flood risks, including an inadequate warning system for roughly half of the communities facing danger when rivers and creeks overflow.

The estimate is triple the figure presented in a 2002 provincewide flood plan that was never fully acted upon, government documents obtained through access-to-information legislation show.

Recommendations from the plan served as the foundation for a government committee created in response to the floods of 2005, which caused widespread damage in southern Alberta and claimed four lives.



Eastbound Glenmore Trail flooded last June following a sudden storm.

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The committee was asked to identify ways to reduce future flood damage and bolster public safety, but its work was halted because of the provincial leadership race.

That changed recently, however, and a new flood blueprint for Alberta is being finalized, said the former committee chairman, Agriculture and Food Minister George Groeneveld, whose Highwood constituency south of Calgary includes several flood-prone communities.

Groeneveld has urged action with his fellow ministers in Municipal Affairs, Environment and Infrastructure.

"My concern is to get the thing back on track because it was very close to wrapped up," he said. "My promise when I went out there (for the committee) was that this wasn't going to be a report that sat on the shelf and gathered dust.

"I certainly hope I don't have to eat my words on that."

The province's 2002 report, called Flood Risk Management Action Plan for Alberta, has never been released publicly.

A copy obtained by the Herald reveals the flood plan resulted from four years of work by a previous government committee, set up in 1998 after flooding in southern Alberta affected thousands of residents and caused extensive destruction three years earlier.

"It could have happened anywhere and it will happen again," the report stated. Implementation of the proposed plan, it added, would decrease the cost of damages to individuals, communities and small businesses, and increase safety during flooding.

The floods of 2005, which struck southern Alberta in three waves, became the most costly natural disaster in the provincial government's history.

Never had so many rivers and creeks raged so forcefully. Nearly 50 communities in southern Alberta were swamped and damaged. In the hardest-hit municipalities, such as Calgary, Okotoks, High River and Sundre, thousands of residents were evacuated and a state of emergency was declared.

The Alberta government is still tallying the cost of the disaster. Reconstruction and payments are expected to continue for another three or four years, said Tracy Balash, a spokeswoman for Alberta Municipal Affairs and Housing.

The province has set aside \$162 million for non-insurable damage, expecting to recover 90 per cent of the price tag from the federal government. Insurable losses such as damage to cars and basements wrecked by sewage cost another \$300 million.

Out-of-pocket expenses for individuals and businesses were numerous, with one government estimate pegging them around \$40 million.

"Flood damages are skyrocketing," said Slobodan Simonovic, a civil and environmental engineering professor at the University of Western Ontario and a director with the Institute for Catastrophic Loss Reduction.

"I strongly advocate investing in mitigation. It pays back many, many times compared with paying the bill after the disaster occurs."

Simonovic was part of a group of researchers that completed a study of flood-risk management in Canada in 2003. While the country was once seen as a leader in tackling flood issues, the study found the federal government drastically cut funding for flood prevention nearly a decade ago.

Since then, a "parade of passing the buck" has emerged, Simonovic said.

Governments usually promise great changes during a disaster, but motivation to act recedes as time passes, the flood-mitigation expert has observed.

Groeneveld is aware the clock is ticking on the Alberta government's second attempt in less than a decade to fully adopt a flood plan.

"I've been warned when I was on the committee that one year after the flood, people are pretty conscious of what's going on," he said.

"From then out, people tend to forget pretty quickly, and so it's hard to get bureaucrats or elected officials really excited again. But things are changing a little bit, and we're having more problems all the time."

Climate change projections for Alberta forecast an increase in extreme weather events, including more frequent flooding. At the moment, several communities in the province's north are on high alert for rising water.

Once the new flood blueprint is complete, Groeneveld said the province would take its proposals to the federal government. Alberta is seeking a funding formula that would see flood-prevention measures divvied among Ottawa, the province and municipalities.

Some of the draft recommendations presented in meetings with roughly 70 municipalities last year would run into hundreds of millions of dollars.

For instance, expanding Alberta Environment's flood forecasting network to provide an appropriate level of warning to all communities exposed to flood risks is estimated to cost \$2.4 million plus an additional \$1.15 million a year to operate the enhanced network.

Building floodways -- permanent channels for diverting water away from a city or town -- or buying land and removing buildings inappropriately built near rivers could cost \$300 million.

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