

LAKE CHAMPLAIN-RICHELIEU RIVER FLOOD STUDY, 2017-2021

The social, political, and economic aspects of flooding

Understanding the impacts of flooding on a community

Understanding the causes and impacts of past floods from a human dimension may help policy makers make decisions about and prepare for future flooding. While some impacts are obvious—damage to homes or infrastructure, and loss of income, and eroded lands and streambanks, there are other deeply felt emotional scars that can stay with victims of floods for many years. Taking stock of the human costs of flooding and their influence on the political and economic will of communities to prepare for future floods is an important part of the Lake Champlain Richelieu River flood study.

The science behind social, political and economic analyses

In the flood study, technical experts are looking at the flooding that took place in the basin during the spring and summer of 2011 through a social lens.

The idea of using social science to assess acceptability of flood mitigation measures was first suggested in the 2013 Plan of Study *The Identification of Measures to Mitigate Flooding and the Impacts of Flooding of Lake Champlain and Richelieu River*.

The study will conduct a combination of surveys, interviews, brainstorming sessions and focus groups to gather and analyze pertinent information. Through these firsthand accounts, as well as historical reviews of personal and media coverage of the flooding, scientific literature and statistical research, the study will start to build a comprehensive picture of the flooding from a basin-wide social perspective. These findings will help determine the acceptability of proposed solutions to reduce flooding and its impacts.

Shared understanding of vulnerabilities

From this understanding of shared human experiences, the study will be better able to pinpoint not only the vulnerabilities of regions in the basin to flooding, but the levels of resiliency as well.

In this study, resiliency refers to the ability or desire of a community to bounce back from an extreme weather event. Vulnerabilities to flooding may include risks to people's homes and surrounding landscapes, human health, ecological consequences, such as the spread of invasive species and other pests, and economic after effects.

Both factors offer key information that policy makers rely on when recommending whether certain solutions should be implemented.

Not all experiences are the same

The challenge when capturing the vulnerabilities to a particular flooding event is that the experiences of communities in different parts of the basin can differ widely. For instance, the economic impacts of the 2011 floods were four times greater in Quebec than in the US, though all people who have experienced the effects of flooding have their own memories of its impacts.

Using science to develop a social map of flooding can create a clearer understanding among the public as well as elected officials of how certain flood mitigation measures may affect communities in different parts of the basin. It can also build a more solid collective social memory, leading to a greater desire among publics for elected officials to make decisions to prevent or mitigate future floods.

Next steps

Much of the social science work of the study will be featured in the Causes and Impacts report, expected in 2019. These will include human narratives about past flooding, along with a summary of press coverage. When the study makes its final recommendations to the International Joint Commission in 2021, they will be backed by a social science perspective to more accurately determine the acceptability of mitigation measures by communities across the Lake Champlain-Richelieu River system. The recommendations will also reflect input from the political bodies that will need to support and fund them.

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