

Floodplains aren't housing havens

HARRISBURG — Some people wouldn't dream of investing in a house constructed by a fly-by-night builder. Yet, they will place their life's savings in a house built on a flood plain.

Building in flood plains has been costly, reports Jim Mank, assistant state conservationist for the USDA Soil Conservation Service in Harrisburg. An average of \$3.4 billion is lost each year to floods. Since 1936, 20 major floods in Pennsylvania have cost over \$5.5 billion in damages.

"This costly error affects all of us with higher insurance, building costs, and relief programs to flood victims," says Mank. "During the 1970s, over \$233 million was paid out in relief money to Pennsylvania flood victims. The adverse publicity of flooding can also

give a community a bad image. Worse, still, is the loss of human lives. Since 1925, floods in the United States have killed over 4,000 people."

Flood plains are the fairly level lands that border rivers, creeks, and coastal waters.

Mank adds that several agencies and organizations have flood plain information available for the asking. The USDA Soil Conservation Service has people in or assigned to almost every county in the United States. They provide assistance, including information about flood plains, free of charge.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers also has flood plain data available. Local planning agencies, regional governmental bodies, and zoning officials may

also have useful material. Some have maps with floodprone areas delineated.

Flood plains vary in size, shape, origin, and description, but they all share one simple characteristic—from time to time they are covered by water, states Mank.

Desirable homesites are purchased every year, with flooding being the last possible thing on the mind of the buyer. The problem is, there are no guarantees.

"The big rain could come tomorrow, next week, or maybe 100 years from now, but it will come, warns Mank. "Flooding can also be repetitive. Damaging storms often occur back-to-back during the same season."

Another contributing factor to flooding is changing conditions on the land. Upstream construction of houses, supermarkets, streets, and parking lots can drastically alter natural drainage patterns. The

sealed surfaces absorb no rainfall, so runoff is greater and takes place faster. If the drainage system of a downstream subdivision is not adequate, a torrent of runoff water can create a flood sometimes after only moderately heavy rains.

Agencies, such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Resources, and SCS have spent over \$1.5 billion on flood prevention measures such as dams and dikes.

"Community leaders often fear that denying intense development on a convenient flood plain will give their locality a reputation of slowing down normal economic growth and discouraging new industry and business," Mank observes.

"Undeveloped flood plains are not lost to the community. They can provide long-term benefits and perform natural functions in water

management and land use that cannot be duplicated by man, no matter the cost.

"For example, agriculture is a basic use of flood plains. Most farmers have long known the value and limitations of flood plains for pastures or growing crops. Parks, sport field areas, hiking paths, and other recreation facilities necessary to an all around attractive community are acceptable on floodprone land.

"Flood plains provide greenbelts, open space, and natural areas. In urban areas, they are often all that remain of the natural world. The City of Allentown has turned flood plains along Jordan and Lehigh Creeks into a beautiful network of city parks. Using flood plains for parks and greenbelts adds to the attractiveness of a community and actually helps contribute to a stable tax base," concludes Mank.

Store farm fuel for emergencies

UNIVERSITY PARK — Availability and cost of petroleum fuels vary. Presently, supplies are up and prices are down, however that may change. Farmers can protect themselves from the fluctuations of the market by developing a fuel storage program.

James W. Garthe, Extension agricultural engineer at Penn State, says farmers can do more to help themselves if fuel prices skyrocket and availability becomes questionable.

Farm fuel storage is often discouraged by common notions of its deterioration. All fuels, especially diesel fuel and gasoline, change during storage. Proper storage, however, will reduce these undesirable changes.

The secret is to keep liquid fuels at a uniform, cool temperature. Chemical and biological degradation of fuel is a function of temperature; the warmer the fuel, the faster it changes.

Generally, an underground tank is considered best because the ground temperature doesn't fluctuate like air does. Temperature changes cause the fuel to expand and contract, allowing fuel vapors to escape out the vent while air enters the tank. With this air exchange comes moisture, which will condense in the tank. A uniform temperature thus reduces evaporation, as well as water buildup.

Garthe adds that one trick to reducing losses and preserving fuel quality is to install a pressure-vacuum relief cap. These caps are

designed to open at two to three pounds per square inch of pressure and less than one-tenth pounds per square inch of vacuum. By controlling tank pressure, vapor losses and water intake are reduced. Farm fuel suppliers sell these caps.

Water in fuel provides an environment in which certain bacteria thrive. They consume fuel while excreting acids and water which degrade fuel and corrode metal surfaces. Over time, they can create gums which will plug fuel filters. Bacteria are mainly a problem in fuels stored for years on end. A biocide, available from fuel distributors, will kill these bacteria. Biocides are costly, but they work.

Rather than worry about long term fuel deterioration, Garthe says a good rule of thumb for storage is: first in, first out. In this way, a farmer can maintain large reserves, yet no fuel would be stored for more than a few months or a year.

"If you cannot rotate supplies due to limitations, consider the pressure-vacuum relief cap and a biocide as a minimum," Garthe recommends.

Many gasoline retailers have gone out of business. At most closed stations the tanks are still in location. Growers might inquire if these tanks could be leased for continuous storage. Used service station tanks that are still sound are available in most large cities and might be purchased for relocation on the farm.

Pa. ASC leaders learn about PIK

HARRISBURG — The Pennsylvania ASC Committee and Executive Director Eugene F. Thompson of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service attended a training meeting on the Feed Grain, Wheat, Cotton, and Rice "Payment-In-Kind Program" this week. The ASCS officials learned their role in the U.S. and World Agriculture at this conference, ASCS Administrator Everett Rank said.

About 200 farmers who serve on the ASCS Committees plus executive directors attended.

Secretary of Agriculture John R. Block spoke at the opening day conference luncheon. Other Department officials addressed the conferees during business sessions of the three-day meeting.

The purpose of the Payment-In-Kind Program is to reduce the 1983 production of grain crops and cotton because of high carryover of preceding years' production. Payment-In-Kind means that commodities now owned by Commodity Credit Corporation, in the Farmer Owned Grain Reserve, and under Price Support Loan will be made available to farmers for acreage taken out of production in 1983.

Pennsylvania ASC Chairman Jesse Wood, Nottingham; Clyde Robison, Coal Center; and Annette Schucker, Troy, members of the State Committee, are responsible for ASCS policy on farm programs in Pennsylvania.

Program details are available at county offices of ASCS.

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