
Science Media Centre Background Briefing - Flood defence is making headlines

Since the public announcement that DEFRA is cutting spending on flood defence in order to meet its £200 million budget cuts, the issue of flood defence has made headlines in the national press and media.

Just one year after Hurricane Katrina caused devastation in the US, the question is being asked – could this happen in the UK? Severe weather is always a risk in the UK and a rise in sea levels as a result of climate change is likely to increase the risk of flooding world-wide.

The Association of British Insurers and the Government's own Select Committee have warned that flood defence spending needs to increase by 10% a year to £750 million by 2011 to deal with the heightened flood risk. Yet instead, the current budget for all flood risk management spending – including flood risk warning systems and evacuation planning – has decreased.

Around 5 million people live in flood risk areas in England and Wales. In the tidal floodplain in London alone there are assets worth £125 billion. How would the UK cope with a Katrina scale flood? Should we be allowing any further housing development on our floodplains?

On Tuesday, 22 August 2006, Jean Venables took part in a panel of experts answering questions at a Background Briefing organised by the Science Media Centre. Also on the panel were Prof Edmund Penning-Rowsell, Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research at Middlesex University and Head of the Flood Hazard Research Centre, Prof Robert Nicholls, leader of the Tundall Centre for Climate Change

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Research's coastal research programme and Dr Rober Muir-Wood, chief research officer at Risk Management Solutions and Lead Author for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2007.

One important lesson to be learned from the disastrous flooding in New Orleans is that investment is needed not just in capital flood defence works, but also in the maintenance and monitoring of existing defences, especially in estuarial areas where subsidence is often a problem.

Furthermore, the UK government must be aware that by increasing the numbers of people living in areas of high flood risk it is also increasing the number of people potentially at risk should a flood event occur. If large-scale housing construction programmes in flood plains are inevitable, then improvements to Building Regulations are needed to ensure sufficient flood resilience of buildings.

On 9 October 2006 the East Coast of England will experience the highest tide for 20 years. As long as the weather is good this is unlikely to cause any problems. However, if it is associated with high winds and a surge generated by a low-pressure weather system, then damage could occur to the sea defences.

With the combined threat of rising sea levels and increased frequency of severe weather incidents due to climate change, there is a clear, substantiated economic case for the UK to invest in flood defences and the cuts in flood risk management budgets could not have come at a worse time.

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For further information, contact Jean Venables at Crane Environmental, Tel: +44 (0)20 8399 4389, Email: jean@crane-environmental.co.uk.