

FLOOD    PROBLEM

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The Skagit River Flood Problem

The investigation of the Skagit River flood problem is one problem upon which farmers and townspeople alike in our area can find a common ground. We have all lived with our Skagit River a long time and have often become complacent about the very real flood danger which exists. In some small way may this report help to show how our area must work to protect itself from the threat which does exist.

The development of this area has always depended upon diking and drainage which are to this day constant problems, since most of the flats are reclaimed from tule and tidelands. At first, each settler with the help of his neighbor built and repaired his own dikes using shovel and wheelbarrow. Despite the productivity of the Skagit Flats, farming on the flats was not without risks. In 1882, six feet of flood water inundated the land, damaged crops, and broke the dikes. But in spite of such setbacks the Flats prospered during the next few years.

Again, during several consecutive years, flood ravaged the Flats. In 1886 the Skagit River overflowed and froze and in 1887 a late spring freshet damaged crops. From 1892 to 1894 disastrous

floods and high tides covered the land with great loss of both crops and stock. Times were indeed hard and most of the farms were heavily mortgaged when in November of 1896 still another flood occurred.

In periods of high water the Skagit would overflow its banks, sending a flood of muddy water down over the Flats, inundating farms and softening privately made earthen dikes along the sloughs, as well as Padilla Bay on the north and Skagit Bay at the south end. Repeated losses of property and destruction of dikes happened so often that public opinion was aroused and appropriations secured to begin protective diking along the Skagit. An early attempt to organize diking districts was unsuccessful because some owners refused to pay their share of the costs.

#### Creation of State Diking Districts

The districts were started by groups which petitioned the County Commissioners for the formation of a diking district. The County Commissioners acted only as an agent to see that the district was legally set up. A board of commissioners was elected, the organization completed, and a tax levied. The diking district commissioners have complete authority and control to see that the work is done, mainly by contract, since the district seldom owns any equipment. Construction and maintenance costs are met by assessments and collected by the county.

The engineers have established intervals at which time we may expect the various floods. We may expect a 1951 type flood of approximately 145,000 second feet at Mount Vernon, about once every 16 years. The 1909 flood of 195,000 second feet at Mount Vernon we may expect every 50 years and the 1949 size crest, 112,00 second feet,

every 6 or 7 years. It is the opinion of former Skagit County engineers, and the corp of engineers that it is the 1909 flood crest that we should prepare for. In other words, river diking and control work should be based on an assumption that such an amount of water must be handled.

In 1909, 1917, and 1921 floods all caused considerable damage in the Skagit Flats area. There were breaks in the river dikes at Avon and near the Harmony School and flooding over almost the whole area. There were also very serious breaks by flood waters into Swinomish Channel at several places with loss of farm land and crops from the salt water coming in. La Conner and Burlington proper were flooded.

#### More Recent Changes

If the 1909 crest size is what we must prepare for, it is vital that the community find out if in fact it is prepared. Since over 35 years have past since a flood approaching this size has been experienced, we might expect certain changes in conditions to help or handicap our ability to meet such a crest.

The considerable dam system on the headwaters of the Skagit is one of these changes. Another important factor affecting our area is the efforts of those who live farther up the Skagit River to avoid flood damage by increasing their protection. Burlington, Sedro Woolley, and other areas up river have grown enormously and have been looking to Skagit River control work. The net effect of this up-river work to us who are on the lower Skagit is that we must be prepared to handle more water than ever before, allowing dam protection of 10%.

Further, a flood in our area would be economically more serious and cause greater damage to property and danger to life than before. Population has grown and more businesses and homes would be damaged.

Most new buildings in our area are built close to the ground without flood threat consideration. If flooding occurs, the water will have to build up to greater depths before the inevitable break out to the Channel or bay occurs.