

# Folkalpoint

## Flooding perceived as volatile threat

It's a deceptive beauty that the Skagit River has. It's so peaceful as it winds through the valley.

Yet so destructive.

Skagit County Flood Engineer Don Nelson speaks of the Skagit with respect, calling it a "mighty river." During a 100-year flood this beautiful slice of water will swell with 240,000 cubic feet of water per second.

In Nelson's words, it will be "a very serious disaster."

But does the average Skagitonian realize the powerful danger of the Skagit?

Larry Kunzler admits he was ignorant when he first moved to the valley. He bought a house in the Nookachamps, not even bothering to ask about flood danger. Heck, he was from Florida! But it only took one winter of having water up to his doorstep to make Kunzler decide to learn all he could about floods.

"Mother Nature played a very cruel trick on the people of Skagit County," he said. "She took a 24-year vacation and allowed an entire generation of people to grow up in the valley thinking floods were only something grampa talked about."

People just won't believe the power of the river, he complained.

"I have to agree with the oldtimers. Nothing will happen of any significance until The Flood happens," he said. "It takes a disaster to wake the people up."

Nelson couldn't say what the public's perception of the Skagit was. But as far as he's concerned, he isn't fooled about the river's power, he said.

He predicted during a 100-year flood the only towns that possibly won't have

water in them are Sedro-Woolley and Mount Vernon — and the latter would be saved only by a maximum floodfighting effort and a little luck.

The dikes are both good and bad, depending upon which side of the dike a person lives. If your side of the dike holds, you and your property are in luck. But . . . "If you're in front of a break, you don't have a chance," Nelson said.

The rushing water from a broken dike will tear houses off foundations and cause terrible agricultural losses, Nelson predicted.

Kunzler said the county's dikes are a source of false security. The maximum protection they offer is for a 14-year flood.

Jim Scott, president of the Skagit County Board of Realtors, said flooding is usually a concern of anyone buying a home in the valley.

"It's usually not the idea of being swept away," he said. "They just don't want to get wet."

Scott said newcomers to the valley tend to react more strongly to the idea of flooding.

However, he said most people are willing to risk buying a home in the floodplain if the land does not have a history of flooding.

He said most Realtors don't try to predict the likelihood of flooding to a prospective home buyer. Even governmental bodies disagree about the depth of a 100-year flood, he noted. All a Realtor can do is tell the buyer the home is in the floodplain. He said that, as a group, Skagit Realtors are "pretty good" about warning people a home is in the floodplain.

1) How likely is disastrous flooding in the Skagit Valley? Very likely, likely or unlikely?

| <u>very likely</u> | <u>likely</u> | <u>unlikely</u> | <u>don't know</u> |
|--------------------|---------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| 10                 | 21            | 15              | 4                 |

2) What do you think is the single best measure to reduce or prevent flood damage here?

|                               |                                |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| don't know — 14               | dredge the river — 15          |
| raise structures — 1          | head for the hills — 1         |
| proper drainage — 3           | ample warning — 2              |
| Avon bypass — 1               | Fir Island floodway — 1        |
| Sauk dam — 2                  | controlling the Sauk River — 1 |
| dike improvement — 6          |                                |
| don't build on floodplain — 2 | no comment — 1                 |

### Readers' responses:

- ★ "My husband's been here 60-some years, and he's never seen a disastrous flood. And now they've got those dams upriver, too."
- ★ "I've seen it flood here. It's very likely. I've been here for 60 years."
- ★ "Newcomers don't know what a flood is like. I remember when you could canoe from Mount Vernon to LaConner. That was in 1909."
- ★ "Basically, there's not a heck of a lot that can be done."
- ★ "I'm a fisherman. The Skagit is filling in just like the Mississippi. They should dredge it, and do it in such a way as not to disturb the fish, like they did on the Samish."
- ★ "The dikes won't be able to hold all the water. We've come so close in the past few years."
- ★ "Right now, I have my doubts the public is warned properly... I don't feel the public knows where to go or what to do during a flood."
- ★ "We live on the river and we just never know."
- ★ "My granny lives beside the dike on the west side of Mount Vernon, and everytime the river gets up to 29.6 it's in her living room."

(The information above represents a random poll of 50 Argus readers. No attempt at a scientifically-valid survey has been made.)

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