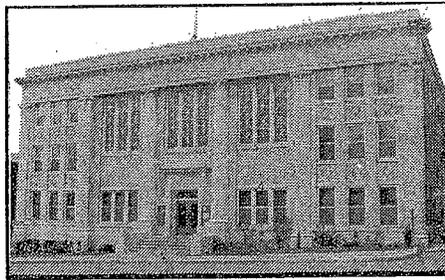


Board of
County Commissioners
245-2234

Clerk District Court
Auditor and Recorder
245-3212

Treasurer and
Tax Collector
245-2421



Prosecuting Attorney
245-2564

Assessor
245-2821

Sheriff
245-2555

Coroner
245-2611

County of Benewah
701 W. College Avenue
St. Maries, Idaho 83861

March 9, 2012

U.S. Army Corp of Engineers
Atten: CECW-CE, Tammy Conforti
441 G Street NW
Washington, DC 20314-1000

RE: Draft Policy Guidance Letter Process for Requesting a Variance from Vegetation Standards

Dear Ms. Conforti,

The Seattle District of the Army Corp of Engineers has had a vegetation variance which dates back to 1995. There are four levees in our community which are in the P.L. 84-99 program and are managed under this vegetation variance. Each one of these levees is over two miles long. This vegetation variance has historically worked for these levees. Each one of these levees has between 60 to 70 homes they are protecting. These levees are protecting not only millions of dollars of infrastructure but also hundreds of people who live behind them.

The P.L. 84-99 program provides for, among other things, the repair and restoration of participating flood-risk reduction projects, such as levee systems, to pre-disaster conditions if they are damaged by a flood event. Idaho State Statute Title 42, Chapter 31 recognizes that the protection of life and property from floods is of great importance to the state. State Statute recognizes Dike Districts as corporations who are managed by Dike Commissioners. The Dike Commissions are charged with the construction, operation, and maintenance of structural works for the prevention of flood water and sediment damage. These Dike Commissioners have been accomplishing this task by working with the Army Corp of Engineers through the P.L. 84-99 program.

Benewah County is a rural county with over 13% unemployment and a 16% poverty level. The median income for a family in the county is \$36,000. 67.8% of the county land base is either in a timber tax or non tax category. Benewah County has experienced a long history of high magnitude floods since first recorded in 1894. Rain on snow events and above normal spring high temperatures are typical antecedents to floods in Benewah County. The St. Maries River comes into the St. Joe River at the town of St. Maries, the location of this levee system. The St. Maries River drains 480 square miles; the St. Joe River drains 1886 square miles.

The US Army Corp of Engineers conducts periodic inspections on these levees because they are in the P.L. 84-99 program. These inspections by qualified flood engineers note any damage that might have occurred during the previous flood event. These inspections provide valuable knowledge to the levee districts regarding any areas that need addressing prior to the next flood season. It also provides the Army Corp of Engineers situational knowledge regarding the condition of the levees for the times when they become involved in a flood fight on these levees.

This draft policy guidance for requesting a variance from vegetation standards is going to result in costing more than levees in our area that are in the P.L. 84-99 program can afford. These levee districts are struggling financially to pay the current costs they are incurring such as pumping water, repairing pumps, and maintaining the levees. They are not going to be able to find money to develop background studies, develop plan and section drawings, develop engineering analysis, develop hydraulic, geotechnical and structural reports, provide soil profiles, and velocity profiles. Being they will not be able to afford these studies, they will not be able to apply for a vegetation variance. These studies were not required by the current Seattle vegetation variance. The current Seattle vegetation variance has provided a level of protection that is working on these levees. We have not been experiencing levee breaches due to vegetation issues.

I am concerned that without a vegetation variance, it will not be long before all these levees in the P.L. 84-99 program classified as unacceptable and removed from the program. As fast as vegetation grows in our area and the number of levee miles involved, it will be very difficult for these dikes to meet the requirements required without a vegetation variance. When these levees are not in the P.L. 84-99 program they will not have the Army Corp of Engineers periodic inspections, deficiencies will not be found, and levee failures will increase. History has shown that it is most cost effective to mitigate than to go through a recovery process. Having levees in the P.L. 84-99 program improves life safety, protects infrastructure and reduces costs to the government. When levees like the ones we have in our areas fail, the magnitude of the damage will result in considerable cost to the local government, the State government, and the Federal government. When levees like the ones in our area fail, it results in Presidential Disaster Declarations.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment,

Sincerely,



Norm Suenkel
Director of Emergency Management
Benewah County, Idaho