

Testimony
WATER-RELATED TOPICS OVERVIEW COMMITTEE
 Senator Tom Fischer, Chairman
June 15, 2010

Chairman Fisher, members of the Water-Related Topics Committee, I am Doug Boknecht. I am a clinical social worker and the assistant regional director of the Lake Region Human Service Center. I am here at the request of Representative Curt Hoffstad, who asked that I brief the committee on "The emotional impact of Devils Lake flooding, and (discuss) the impact to the Devils Lake community of continued Devils Lake flooding". Given the time limitations, there are some areas that I will not cover, for example discussion of the array of community, public, private, charitable and faith-based organizations, and as well as the VolAd agencies that continue to play important roles in disaster response. I have tried to identify for the committee those most substantive disaster stress and recovery challenges. I would submit the following bullets for the committee's consideration:

- Today's presenters, both before and after me, are going to be telling you more about the human impact of this disaster. One of the things I learned over the course of fighting this flood since 1993 is, whether we are talking about roads, rural sewer systems, or rail lines, each of those concerns has an element of stress that affects people. I was recently reading the final draft of the April 2010 State Risk Assessment: Devils and Stump Lakes, prepared by the Department of Human Services and the Department of Emergency Management. At core, this document offers a broad overview of those challenges that most substantially contribute to overall disaster stress.
- It is important to understand that in contrast to traditional flooding, there are important differences related to the nature of the flooding in this basin. These differences have resulted in challenges to successfully adapting disaster response policies and methodologies to maximum effect. There are similar differences in how stress plays out differently here. One quick example:

A common mental health response to a typical disaster is to saturate the community with information and handouts about recognizing and getting help for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The Devils Lake flood-related PTSD presentations over the past 17 years have been minimal. It may be that for those who have crashed a car into the waters of Devils Lake and survived, there may be flashbacks and other symptoms. For the most part though, rather than a sudden traumatic experience, the stress that accompanies this flood is slow, relentless, and insidious, with occasional surges and temporary respites.

This leads me to the response to the first question asked by the committee... "Discuss the emotional impact of the devils lake flooding". In consideration that there are differences in how the Devils Lake flood brings on stress, I would propose that the following four stress principles are pertinent:

1. Chronic stress is a factor in the region. Some of you may recall as a child, walking outside after a rain and looking at a spider web. A spider web can be an engineering marvel in terms of strength, uniformity, and symmetry.

If someone takes a stick or broom to that spider web, the spider will typically return to rebuild another similarly complex web. If the web is destroyed the second time, the spider is used to broken and torn webs given old mother nature, so the web will be well restored one more time. One might ask, what will happen to that web, if each new creation is swept away again, and again, and again. The answer is that there does come a point where the web deteriorates in complexity and uniformity. This is one risk of chronic stress.

Unofficial numbers, but according to my math, there have been 15 presidential disaster declarations in the past 17 years. That is like 15 swats to the intricate spider web that comprises the Lake Region. The swats to this region have been ongoing. Stomme subdivision is gone, Eagle Bend subdivision has a few remaining residents hanging on by a thread. We moved most of the people from the town of Churches Ferry out of harms way, and a similar mitigation solution is now in the process of being made available, particularly to residents of the city of Penn. Over time, many homes moved and some burned. The family who lived for two years with four feet of water in their basement, or the individual who has six sump pumps running to try to stay ahead of the ground seepage, all can vividly tell you what chronic stress feels like. The examples go on and on.

2. Resiliency: Many residents of Florida have a somewhat similar chronic disaster effect because of the frequent hurricanes that hit their shorelines. Floridians are familiar with and well practiced in implementing their community disaster plan. They board up their windows and in mass, drive north out of harms way. Repeated disaster experience can improve disaster resiliency and that resilience is definitely evident within the Lake Region. This flood fight is not fought with a million or more sand bags. Our sandbags are rocks along shorelines, heavy earth moving equipment to shore up everything from the embankments to the personal flood walls that some home owners try to maintain. Also, while overall clinical presentations are up, for the most part, our local residents are not

responding with some of the problems that can accompany some disaster affected communities, for example rises in domestic violence or child abuse, or substance abuse. We have not seen any clear indication that those problems are escalating here in reaction to the flood. Rather there are two other stress indicators that I would draw your attention to.

3. The first is called "ambiguous grief", a concept developed by Dr. Pauline Boss, professor emeritus of University of Wisconsin. A typical disaster often has a high incidence of more standard grief reactions, such as the people lost in the recent flash floods that hit Arkansas. Here in the Lake Region, there have been flood related deaths, particularly associated with cars driving off the roadways, but for the most part the more useful picture of the grief being experienced in the Lake Region is ambiguous grief. These are the kind of losses that are not traditionally or formally recognized with established grieving rituals within our society. The farmer who has lost hundreds or thousands of acres to the flood does not get a funeral to validate and help claim that grief. The folks who have moved their homes, moved their communities, had their plans, hopes and dreams substantially altered, each have loss and grief to consider. Like traditional grief, the loss experienced from ambiguous grief can be perceived as moderate, serious or severe. The sense of loss is an important stress factor to recognize among people within the basin. Spirit Lake Tribal Chair Myra Pearson can tell you about the losses of traditional plants and access to cultural sites, as well as speak to the anxiety of the children affected. Years ago, one of the first disaster contacts I had was from a couple who explained that they had for years worked on their lakeside cabin, having the intention to retire to that residence. The flood came and they fought the valiant fight. They diked, they built the dike higher and higher again, but ultimately their dream succumbed to the ever rising lake. They were seeing me to acknowledge and sort through the grief of their loss.

Dr. Boss well knows the temperament and metal of the people of the Midwest, and incorporates that conceptually into her theory of ambiguous loss. On average, Midwesterners have a high need to achieve on tasks they take on, and many do try to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps". Many feel, "somehow, someway I must win this flood fight". My dad was a farmer, and in combination with his cultural background the saying applied: "You know, my dad loved my mom so dog-gone much, he almost told her one time". Sometimes, despite all the hard work, mother nature never-the-less wins the flood fight, and it can be difficult to recognize that grief is important to address, and

often is best addressed by "seeking a shoulder" of a loved one, friend or pastor.

4. Anticipatory stress is another disaster dynamic to be aware of in relation to understanding people impact of this flood. The residents of the city of Penn can tell you what anticipatory stress feels like as they experience a delayed wait for congress to approve funding from the federal level. Meanwhile they don't know what their appraisal amount will be and are without important information they need to be able to make an informed decision on how to proceed. Trish, our mayor of Minnewaukan can readily describe the ambiguous grief of having lost the town golf course, the school's athletic fields, the 281 highway through town, and the gradual loss of homes being moved out of harms way. She can tell you all about anticipatory stress to as the town continues the fight to find viable means to survive.

The committee's second question was to discuss the impact of continued Devils Lake flooding. My response is two fold:

1. The lake rise and flood inundation last year and this year was substantially stressful. In addition to wide-spread flood impacts on individuals and communities, there is also substantial anticipatory stress around what flood dynamic may be the next to challenge the stability of our community's spider web. Will it be the railroad, the failure of a rural sewer line, or of a major and difficult to repair power line failing? Each of these loses make the community web difficult to maintain, and expensive to restore. In addition to people currently affected, there are many more who are looking toward their future with ambivalence, and feeling considerable anticipatory stress.

Lake Region Human Service Center has run several federally funded crisis counselor programs associated with prior disaster declarations, but the region has not qualified for this funding for the past decade, nor have we qualified despite the higher incidence of people affected during the past two year. As the flood concerns continue to shift from this being a regional crisis to growing concern about the possibility of this becoming a North Dakota catastrophic flood disaster, we likely will see a rise in anticipatory stress from down stream communities as they recognize the devastation that would result from an uncontrolled discharge. There is no question in my mind that North Dakota will easily qualify for substantial crisis counselor program funding should uncontrolled discharge happen. This is the kind of scenario that keeps disaster responders up at night. That event must not happen.

2. Anticipatory hope: In my opinion, the escalated flooding the basin has experienced in the last two years had led to an apparently broad shift in paradigm about how people of the lake region are viewing the flood battle and ideas about how to win the fight. The casino held a major fishing tournament this past weekend and I happened to be out there at 7:00 a.m. to watch the second day's launch. In most tournaments, it is typical as boats leave the marina for them to split up, head out in all different directions as they try to get to their favorite fishing holes. Sunday's launch was substantially different. Fifty five boats headed out and fifty of them headed exactly in the same direction across main bay. Almost every one was trying to win the 20 mile race to be among the first to pick out their territory up north at Pelican. The broad shift in thinking that seems pervasive across the region appears to be recognition that prior approaches to controlling this flood are no longer sufficient, and that the potential for substantial to catastrophic flood impact in upcoming years is approaching unacceptable levels. The current anticipatory hope is a realization that we have to get more water off of this lake. You will have heard this message strongly stated by community leaders such as Fred Bott and Joe Belford. Similar to the example of all the boats headed in the same direction at launch, I think it important for the committee to know that these leaders speak with authority backed by an overwhelming majority of people within the region.

In closing, I would mention one last stress variable worth nothing. When stress is the highest, in general people cope better, to the degree they perceive that they have some control over their destiny. To the extent they feel powerless and hopeless, their resiliency is lower. That North Dakota established the original west-end outlet, and now is increasing the flow rate, this ability to start to control lake level is quite helpful in giving people hope. To the extent that the committee can achieve other solutions that offer a sense of hope and ability to control outcomes, the better the affected individuals and communities will successfully cope with the issues confronting them.

This concludes my testimony.