Rising Sea Levels Challenge Flood Insurance Management

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Climate Change

A house on the Plum Island seacoast in Newbury, Mass., sits partially collapsed into the churning surf, driven by winds from a slow-moving storm centered far out in the Atlantic Ocean, at high tide on March 8, 2013. AP Photograph/Seth Wenig

Waves splash against a seawall and onto houses along the Atlantic coast Dec. 9 in Scituate, Mass. AP Photograph/Steven Senne

We are primarily due to the melting of ice (such as glaciers and ice caps) as well as the thermal expansion of the oceans, that is, as the earth warms more ice melts and, as a consequence, the oceans also warm. A relationship is born between ocean water and rising sea. As the earth warms more, we should expect sea levels to continue to rise. Again, it is hard for us to see the relationship between an average warming of our planet overall and the rise in average ocean levels. The process can seem deceptively slow, particularly when we compare the time frame we experience to the thermal expansion of the oceans. Scientists use the long-term, multi-decadal climate records to connect that experience to what we experience on a day-to-day basis. We can be lulled into a false sense of security about how we approach it. For example, what should the government be doing today, if anything, about rising seas? Should it take a wait-and-see approach, or should it be more proactive in helping to prevent the potential dangers of our coastlines? No doubt many of us, including me, have committed ourselves to the notion that the oceans will melt, sea levels will rise, and our coastal communities will need to change in some way. But one can certainly argue with the governments, or lack thereof, inherent in Briggert-Waters. Briggert-Waters attempted to change the terms of the National Flood Insurance Program, or NFIP, created to help in the sharing of those costs. Citizens living in flood-prone areas would take some of the risk with the federal government subsidizing the remaining risk through reduced premiums and federal disaster relief. Probabilistic the strongest impetus for Briggert-Waters was that we are more at risk. The end result was a moratorium on most of those provisions in the first half of 2014.

Flood insurance needed change

While many feel Briggert-Waters was too much of a change, we might consider why Congress felt compelled to alter its longstanding coastal flood insurance policy in the first place. Since 1968 our federal government has been in the business of providing national flood insurance. The National Flood Insurance Program, or NFIP, was created to help in large part to deal with the costs of flooding disasters. Disaster response and recovery more often, and the federal government historically took responsibility through federal disaster relief efforts. Taxpayer money was paying the full cost for those living in flood-prone areas. The NFIP was created to help in the sharing of those costs. Citizens living in flood-prone areas would take some of the risk with the federal government subsidizing the remaining risk through reduced premiums and federal disaster relief. Probably the strongest impetus for Briggert-Waters occurred in the past decade or so. Flood-related losses have far exceeded the premiums brought in under the NFIP. As the scientists have noted, flooding events are becoming more frequent and intense. This has led to greater losses than anticipated, requiring the NFIP to borrow more and more taxpayer money from the federal government to cover those losses. Briggert-Waters was an attempt to shift some of that risk onto those owning coastal properties.

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