

Washington Report; The Flood of 1972: A personal
report by Senator Dick Schweiker, 1972 August

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SENATOR DICK SCHWEIKER

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THE FLOOD OF 1972 - A PERSONAL REPORT

By every measure, the tragic flooding caused by Hurricane Agnes was the worst natural disaster in the history of the United States. Pennsylvania received the brunt of the storm, the flooding, and the damage. Officials and private citizens demonstrated a spirit of cooperation and public support that saved many lives and much property. Flood-ravaged communities are faced with an almost impossible task of recovery and rebuilding. Existing federal legislation authorizing relief assistance and recovery support was totally inadequate. As your U.S. Senator, I thought it would be helpful for you to have a report on my personal activities in connection with the flood.

... THE AWFUL FLOOD STATISTICS: When the waters receded, 47 Pennsylvanians were dead, thousands were homeless, and damage estimates approached \$3 billion. At Wilkes-Barre, on the east branch of the Susquehanna, 50 percent more water passed than during the previous record flood in 1936. At Harrisburg, the flow was one million cubic feet per second at its height. Agnes dumped enough water on the Eastern United States to fill a lake the size of the District of Columbia (67 square miles) to a depth of 2000 feet.

... A PRESIDENTIALLY-DECLARED DISASTER: As the floods reached emergency proportions Friday afternoon, June 23, I wired President Nixon urging immediate designation of Pennsylvania as a federal disaster area. The bureaucratic delays in designating some Pennsylvania counties as disaster areas were far too long, and I have introduced legislation to permit an immediate Presidential declaration, without formal reports "where it is obvious that a disaster of major proportions is occurring."

... A PERSONAL TOUR OF THE DISASTER: Saturday, June 24, I joined Lt. General Frederick J. Clarke, Chief of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and flew from Washington to Pennsylvania for a personal review of the flood disaster. It was a shock to see and walk through the widespread devastation, with cities along the Susquehanna River looking like islands. During my inspection I was proud of the courage and determination of people in the flood-ravaged areas.

... FEDERAL FLOOD RELIEF: My personal observations of Pennsylvania flood damage made it obvious that unparalleled federal assistance was necessary.

... FEDERAL COORDINATION: Clearly, both the federal and state governments were unprepared for a disaster the magnitude of Hurricane Agnes. The flood relief effort became bogged down in red tape, plagued by bureaucratic lethargy and a serious lack of coordination between the various bureaucracies involved in the flood recovery effort. In mid-July I contacted the White House to strongly urge the naming of a "flood czar", one man on-the-scene, with authority to pull together the dozens of federal agencies involved in the flood cleanup. On August 12 the President named Frank Carlucci, Associate Director of the President's Office of Management and Budget and a native of the Wilkes-Barre area, to head the federal flood relief program in Pennsylvania.

... AND CONGRESSIONAL AUTHORIZATIONS: Congress authorized \$200 million for the disaster, at Senator Scott's and my request. A larger \$1.6 billion appropriations bill for flood relief passed Congress in mid-August. The SBA loan program was changed to authorize up to a \$5,000 grant to victims of the flood. Interest rates on individual and small business disaster loans have been lowered by Congress from over 5% to 1%. Highway aid, transportation assistance, aid to farmers, and flood insurance review are other areas where Congress has taken action.

"Since the end of World War II, we have given away \$210 billion in foreign aid and Marshall plan aid. When at the drop of a hat, we will decide to spend \$100 billion to rebuild Europe and rebuild the industries of Japan, I think it is about time that we paid attention to our own people when they get hit with the greatest natural disaster in the history of the United States of America." (Senator Schweiker in August 4, 1972, Senate debate on Hurricane Agnes disaster relief legislation)

However, Congress has not provided the assistance Senator Scott and I feel Pennsylvania deserves. With 70% of Hurricane Agnes affecting Pennsylvania, Senators and Congressmen from other States just were not receptive to our appeals for increased aid. During debate in the Senate over the loan and grant program of SBA, the Senate rejected my amendments to increase this amount, and in fact, reduced the program. Under former SBA law, flood-victim individuals and businesses were eligible for loan forgiveness grants up to \$2,500. This was clearly inadequate. But when the Senate took up recommendations to increase this "grant" to \$5,000, it adopted an amendment to impose an "income" test to reduce the amount of the grant for persons with incomes over \$10,000. I felt that even the \$5,000 grant was not enough. \$5,000 does not go very far for a family with a middle income that has to repair or replace a \$20,000 home. In fact, the average damage to the 21,000 homes in Wilkes-Barre hit by the flood was \$20,000. I strenuously argued against the "income" limitation, and even distributed copies of Wilkes-Barre newspaper flood editions to every Senator to dramatize the urgent need. The income "limitation" prevailed in the Senate, but fortunately it was dropped from the bill by the Senate-House conferees.

I then introduced an amendment to raise the grant level to \$7,500. Only Senator Scott and 10 other Senators supported my proposal. I am convinced that if the damage from Hurricane Agnes had not been concentrated in Pennsylvania, and had been spread out over a large number of states, my amendment would have been adopted overwhelmingly.

Fortunately, some of my other flood relief efforts were more successful in Congress: aid to public education, aid to private education, small business loans for working capital and stock replacement in addition to property damage repairs, highway assistance, an updated flood control study of the Susquehanna River Basin by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and a new federal dam inspection program, all of which we got Congress to accept. In addition, I was active in insuring that no federal red-tape would prevent Pennsylvania from fully using Pennsylvania National Guardsmen wherever needed in flood recovery work, rather than sending them to routine summer drill camp.

Since the week of June 19, when Agnes hit Pennsylvania, I have devoted a great deal of my legislative work to flood relief for Pennsylvania. For your information, here is my chronological diary highlighting my flood-relief work:

SATURDAY, JUNE 24--Toured Wilkes-Barre and Harrisburg with Lt. General Clarke at the height of the flood.

MONDAY, JUNE 26--Introduced with Senator Scott amendment to provide additional \$200 million for immediate disaster relief. Passed Senate next day.

TUESDAY, JUNE 27--Met with Governor Shapp and Pennsylvania Congressmen to map flood relief strategy.

--Secured Senate assurances that Labor-HEW Appropriations funds for emergency aid to public schools and colleges could be used for flood damages in Pennsylvania.

THURSDAY, JUNE 29--Called for updated flood control study of Susquehanna River Basin so flood control projects would include new record flood levels. Senate Public Works Committee granted my request July 11.

--Introduced with Senator Scott S. 3782, "Emergency Transportation Facilities Restoration Act of 1972", to authorize up to \$60 million in emergency flood relief assistance to railroads.

FRIDAY, JUNE 30--Supported H.J.Res. 1238 to provide special appropriations for \$200 million in disaster relief in lieu of the \$200 million disaster appropriation in the Labor-HEW Bill because of anticipated delay in final approval of Labor-HEW bill.

FRIDAY, JULY 7--Urged Secretary of Army to allow Pennsylvania National Guardsmen to substitute flood relief duty for their two-week annual summer camp requirements. Army granted my request July 18.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 12--Contacted FMC Corporation, San Jose, California, to urge reconsideration of announced closing of American Viscose plant in Lewistown. Some 2,000 jobs at stake because of flood damage to the plant.

THURSDAY, JULY 13--Urged White House to appoint "flood czar" to coordinate federal flood relief efforts in Pennsylvania. Concerned with slow pace and need to cut red-tape.

MONDAY, JULY 17--Joined Senator Scott in introducing two bills: S. 3795, President Nixon's "Agnes Recovery Act", raising disaster grant levels to \$5,000 and reducing interest rates on disaster loans above \$5,000 to 1%; and S. 3796, to authorize additional appropriations for repair of highways damaged by the flooding.



ON THE SCENE--During my June 24 tour of the flood-ravaged Wilkes-Barre area, I stopped to confer with General John Morris of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, (center) and John Eisenhooth, a former Pennsylvania State Trooper responsible for security in the flood area. Accompanying me was Lt. General Frederick J. Clarke, Chief of the Corps of Engineers.

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(Mr.) (Mrs.) (Miss)

Street _____

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(August 1972)

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NE--During my June 24 tour of ravaged Wilkes-Barre area, I confer with General John the U.S. Army Corps of Engin-ter) and John Eisenhooth, a nsylvania State Trooper re-for security in the flood ompanying me was Lt. General J. Clarke, Chief of the Corps rs.

TUESDAY, JULY 18--Introduced S. 3804 to make disaster relief funds available to private institutions of higher learning. This provision, as a Scott-Schweiker amendment, later became part of the disaster relief bill and included private elementary and secondary schools as well.

--Introduced S. 3805 to significantly expand disaster relief for individuals and businesses. This bill would have 1) increased grant levels to \$15,000 for individuals and \$100,000 for businesses, including agriculture; 2) provided for "progress" or "installment" payments to individuals and communities while reconstruction work is continuing; 3) authorized immediate designation of federal disaster areas by the President without massive paperwork justifications where "it is obvious that a disaster of major proportions is occurring"; 4) permitted federal disaster loans for "working capital" and "operating expenses" for small businesses rather than just for reconstruction and repair expenses; (This provision, as a Schweiker Amendment, was incorporated in SBA disaster loan bill which is now law.) 5) extended federal tax loss reimbursement program for local governments to non-property tax losses. Current law authorizes reimbursement only for property tax losses; (Forty-five percent of Pennsylvania local tax revenue comes from non-property taxes.) and 6) reduced interest rates for disaster loans to 1 percent from 5 1/8 percent.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 19--Testified before Senate Subcommittee on Small Business to urge enactment of Schweiker comprehensive disaster relief bill, S. 3805.

FLOOD TELETHON--On July 22 I participated in Bob Hope's national Red Cross Flood Relief Telethon at WPVI-TV in Philadelphia. Pictured with me are co-moderator Al Alberts, (left) Ralph W. Ervin Jr., Chairman of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Red Cross, and co-moderator Diana Robinson. I discussed the flood relief legislation then pending in Congress and helped answer calls from those pledging assistance.



THURSDAY, JULY 20--Met with Lewistown community leaders to discuss impact of closing of flood-damaged American Viscose plant on Mifflin County area.

MONDAY, JULY 24--Introduced S. 3843, "Emergency Railroad Relief Act of 1972", with Senator Scott. This legislation authorizes up to \$40 million in long-term federal loans to restore or replace essential railroad facilities damaged by the flood.

TUESDAY, JULY 25--Supported passage of H.R. 15950, the House version of a bill I cosponsored in the Senate, S. 3843, to increase from \$50 million to \$100 million emergency highway funds and appropriate an additional \$100 million specifically for recovery from Hurricane Agnes.

--Supported passage of H.R. 15951, House version of a bill I cosponsored in Senate, S. 3842, authorizing Secretary of Army to undertake national program of dam inspections. Many, including several coal mine waste dams in Pennsylvania, failed during flood.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 26--Supported passage of S. 3840, to authorize \$200 million to make low-interest emergency loans available through the Farmers Home Administration.

SUNDAY, JULY 30--Appeared with General Clarke on my regular monthly radio and television report to Pennsylvania. Discussed Corps' flood control projects in Pennsylvania, and steps needed to prevent a repetition of the June disaster.

MONDAY, JULY 31--Met with group of Wilkes-Barre educators to discuss need for private institutions to receive federal disaster assistance. The 17 private colleges in Pennsylvania affected by Agnes suffered total flood damages of more than \$15 million.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 2--Met with Corps of Engineers and Pennsylvania Congressmen to discuss flood control projects in Pennsylvania.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 4--Voted for H.R. 15692, new SBA disaster loan law which raises grant level to \$5,000 and reduces interest rate to 1 percent.

--Fought for passage of Schweiker amendment to raise grant level to \$7,500. It lost by a 69-12 vote.

NAME AND ADDRESS CORRECTIONS

(Mr.) (Mrs.) (Miss) _____

Street _____

Town & Zip Code _____

(August 1972)

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--Won acceptance of Schweiker-Scott amendment giving disaster aid to private schools.

--Won acceptance of Schweiker amendment to extend low-interest disaster relief loans to small businesses for "working capital" and "operating expenses".

--Supported Javits amendment allowing SBA to suspend payments of the principal of loans or mortgages for elderly if payments constitute a substantial hardship.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 8--Announced \$250,000 Housing and Urban Development grant to Pennsylvania for development of a comprehensive disaster recovery program.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 9--Announced designation of Dauphin, Luzerne, Lycoming, Mifflin, Northumberland, Schuylkill, Susquehanna and Wyoming Counties as "redevelopment areas". Individuals, businesses and local governments in these counties will be eligible for special grants and loans from the Economic Development Administration.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 10--Announced availability of low-priced government-owned feed grains to farmers in six Pennsylvania counties--Bradford, McKean, Mifflin, Potter, Snyder and Northumberland. Grain supplies in these counties were depleted by the flood.

MONDAY, AUGUST 14--Introduced S. 3912, the "Flood Insurance Act Amendments of 1972", to drastically expand federal flood insurance to protect all citizens and communities from future floods. The bill 1) provides authority for all individuals to obtain federally subsidized flood insurance, even though their community has not been officially approved for flood insurance; 2) doubles limits available for insurance coverage from \$17,500 to \$35,000 for single family residential units and from \$30,000 to \$60,000 for non-residential units; and 3) requires that an individual in a "flood-prone area" purchase federal flood insurance as part of obtaining any federal mortgage insurance from FHA, VA or the Farmer's Home Administration. Premiums would remain at the present rate of \$25 per year per \$10,000 of coverage.

--At news conference, applauded President Nixon's appointment of a "flood czar" to provide on-the-scene direction of federal flood relief work, expressed my growing concern over "red-tape" and "bureaucratic lethargy" which had been hampering the flood relief effort in Pennsylvania, and said that a single "flood czar" would be essential to insure that all federal assistance operated smoothly.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 15--Testified before Senate Subcommittee on Housing and Urban Affairs on Schweiker flood insurance proposals urging action by full Congress this Fall.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 16--Praised House action in passing new \$1.5 billion appropriation bill for relief from Hurricane Agnes. This key appropriations bill, recommended by President Nixon, originated in House, as do all appropriations. Worked to win passage next day in Senate.

... THE WORK HAS JUST BEGUN: This is a report on the initial steps of the Congress, and the initial activities that I, as your U.S. Senator, took immediately following the flood. Three main tasks remain: (1) getting Pennsylvania on its feet, through federal grants and loans, through the work of federal and state agencies; (2) rebuilding flood control projects and planning new, better flood controls, to prevent any recurrence of the floods, and (3) reforming and improving disaster relief operations, including flood insurance, OEP assistance, on-the-scene disaster coordination, and the entire governmental bureaucracy so relief and recovery can flow immediately to the people who desperately need it. The job will be done through coordination with federal, state, and local officials. The cooperation of all citizens and communities will be essential. Senator Scott and I, and the entire Pennsylvania Congressional delegation, will continue to do whatever we can in Washington to help Pennsylvania recover from the flood.

Dick Schweiker

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20510

Richard S. Schweiker
U.S.S.

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