

University of Delaware
Disaster Research Center

PRELIMINARY PAPER
#251

COMMENTS ON THE SECOND
ASSESSMENT

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1997

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It is my job to say something, but not much, about the Second Assessment of Natural Hazards Research. I have always been somewhat puzzled by such periodic assessments. I am never sure that such ritual occasions are organized to point to the future or to recall the past. As recollections, one cannot fail to be impressed with the cumulative progress of the past 25 years. In contrast with the first assessment, which was more theoretical and perhaps more speculative, the second assessment is packed, perhaps one might say cluttered, with research of the recent past.

Let me start with the observation that three of the persons who were involved with the first assessment, done in the early 70's, are here today. Both Gilbert and Roy have aged gracefully but Mileti has aged precipitously, which is still better than posthumously, since he has had the responsibility for doing the second assessment.

The design of that process was participatory where various subgroups of "experts" collected and collated materials which filtered up to the top in a giant pyramid scheme. Such an arrangement, however laudatory in principal, means in practice that dozens of people have dumped incomplete and unedited manuscripts on Mileti for him to resolve overlaps, inconsistencies and redundancies. Let me be clear that when I use the name Mileti, it is used as a collective noun since many have made contributions to the content and the final product.

Using the first assessment as a baseline, it is obvious that certain things have been accomplished, most notably the call for the development of a clearinghouse service. The creation and operation of the Natural Hazards Center over the last 20 years has been important as a focal

point as well as extensive description of Involved People and Organization (Chapter 6), most became into existence after the first assessment.

Certain things have not changed. I was struck by a comment on page 8 of the summary of the first assessment. "It may seem foolhardy to recommend new directions and perhaps increased funding for natural hazards research at a time when intensive efforts are made to restrict federal funding because of the nation's economic problems." Deja vu, all over again. And there not surprisingly is constancy in researcher's feeling that they are unappreciated and practitioners feeling that researchers are unintelligible.

Certainly, the volume of research covered increased between the first and second assessment. In addition, there is greater attention given to land use, insurance, engineering, forecasting, adoption and implementation topics which are only tangentially discussed in the first assessment. And there are other significant changes in emphasis. In the first assessment, mitigation was not even in the index, although "adjustments" had somewhat equivalent meaning. Risk was only considered as a personality attribute as in risk-taking but now it is given a full chapter. And the concept of sustainability, nowhere in the first assessment, now has become the major organizing theme.

Certainly, both the first and second assessments represent monumental attempt to record and assess the research tradition. On the other hand, there is little evidence that the first has or the second will have any effect on the direction of policy or on the allocation of research funding for the future. After the first assessment, the major catalyst to research came from the Accident at Three Mile Island and from fallout from Bhopal and only incidentally from concerns for any "natural" hazard. Barring another TMI and Bhopal, one might anticipate that the direction of research after this second assessment might be most heavily influenced by an increasingly

distribution of wealth while starting in midcentury political conflict centered on the distribution of national power. At the end of the Cold War, political conflict now has shifted to the distribution of risk. By contrast, Mileti speaks of a time when imagination, quality of life, equity and local consensus mark the harbingers of the future. This diverges quite dramatically with the more probable scenario where risk is an integral part of the global economy and when the rearrangement of risk, not its reduction, will continue to be a dominant organizing principle. To emphasize "sustainability" in this context is somewhat like repeating Jesse Jackson's mantra "Keep Hope Alive." It is important to keep optimism alive but sustainability is not likely to carry the future. On the other hand it is nicer to think about than reality.