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NOAA'S NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE AND SUSQUEHANA RIVER BASIN COMMISSION MARK 35TH ANNIVERSARY OF HURRICANE AGNES' FLOODS

NOAA's National Weather Service and the Susquehanna River Basin Commission this week are marking the 35th anniversary of Hurricane Agnes, which caused the worst recorded flooding throughout the Susquehanna River Basin. The deadly storm serves as a vivid reminder to remain vigilant and use the lessons of the past to prepare for the future.

The remnants of Hurricane Agnes, by then a tropical storm, stalled over New York and Pennsylvania from June 21 through 24, 1972, dumping between 10 and 18 inches of rain over the mountainous areas of Pennsylvania and western New York with six to 10 inches common elsewhere.

Seventy-two lives were lost in the Susquehanna basin and an estimated $2.8 billion in damages suffered, $14 billion in today's dollars. Other parts of the East coast also experienced record flooding, including Virginia and Maryland. All told, Agnes took 122 lives and caused more than $12 billion in damages (more than $59 billion in 2007 dollars). At the time, Hurricane Agnes was the nation's costliest natural disaster.

"As we have all learned from Agnes and all the subsequent major floods, the Susquehanna basin is extremely flood prone," said David Nicosia, warning coordination meteorologist at the National Weather Service forecast office in Binghamton, N.Y. "In particular, much of central New York and northern Pennsylvania lie within the headwaters of the Susquehanna River Basin where many small streams and tributaries feed the larger rivers. This condition makes the region extremely vulnerable to heavy rainfall from tropical storms. Flooding can develop rapidly and pose a real danger to those who live in the basin."

Hurricane Agnes followed a path into the Florida panhandle and up the East coast, where it weakened as it headed toward the Atlantic Ocean. The storm then re-emerged with regained wind speed off the New Jersey coast before veering westward toward northern Pennsylvania. It stalled over the Susquehanna basin, wreaking havoc as rivers and streams overflowed their banks like never before. In some places, the floodwaters crested as much as eight feet above previous record high flows.

"While flooding can not be prevented when rainfall of the magnitude of Agnes occurs, advances in river gauging, remote rainfall estimates, the implementation of the Advanced Hydrologic Prediction Service (AHPS), and warning programs over the last 35 years will certainly help to mitigate loss of property and life today if a similar event were to occur," said Peter Jung, National Weather Service senior service hydrologist at State College, Pa.

The National Weather Service is modernizing its flood and warning services nationwide through its AHPS implementation. AHPS extends the range and quantifies the uncertainty of National Weather Service river forecasts, and provides timely, user-friendly texts, and graphical products accessible via the internet.

To improve flood warnings and flood protection for the residents and businesses along the Susquehanna River, the Susquehanna River Basin Commission has coordinated an interagency committee on the Susquehanna flood forecasting and warning system since 1986. The Susquehanna system provides the data used by the National Weather Service to predict flood levels and issue timely and more accurate flood forecasts.

“There have been so many improvements to flood mitigation since the time of Hurricane Agnes, including the onset of the enhanced Susquehanna flood warning system,” said Paul Swartz, the Susquehanna River Basin Commission executive director. “The commission is proud of the 26-year model partnership with the National Weather Service and other federal and state agencies to maintain and operate the Susquehanna system that helps save lives and reduce flood damages.”

The Susquehanna River Basin Commission is the governing agency established under a 100-year compact signed on December 24, 1970, by the federal government and the states of New York, Pennsylvania, and Maryland to protect and wisely manage the water resources of the Susquehanna River Basin. The Susquehanna River starts in Cooperstown, N.Y., and flows 444 miles to Havre de Grace, Md., where the river meets the Chesapeake Bay.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, is celebrating 200 years of science and service to the nation. From the establishment of the Survey of the Coast in 1807 by Thomas Jefferson to the formation of the Weather Bureau and the Commission of Fish and Fisheries in the 1870s, much of America's scientific heritage is rooted in NOAA.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, more than 60 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

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On the Web:
NOAA: http://www.noaa.gov
NOAA’s National Weather Service: http://www.weather.gov
Advance Hydrologic Prediction Service: http://www.weather.gov/ahps/
NOAA’s Middle Atlantic River Center: http://www.erh.noaa.gov/er/marfc/
NOAA’s National Hurricane Center: http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/index.shtml
Susquehanna River Basin Commission: www.srbc.net
Susquehanna River Basin Flood Forecasting and Warning System: www.susquehannafloodforecasting.org