



Extreme urban flooding as a focusing event: the case of Tropical Storm Allison

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Focusing events such as natural or technological disasters can have significant impacts on public policy in the near and long terms. These impacts can be measured and assessed across different temporal scales ranging from immediate media attention and disaster relief efforts through the mobilization of policy communities, the development and/or evolution of institutions and subsequent policy shifts from the status quo in an effort to adapt to or mitigate future events. The research presented here applies a focusing event framework to assess the local and regional policy impact of major urban flooding in Houston, Texas, primarily from Tropical Storm Allison. Tropical Storm Allison, which dropped 36 inches of rain on Houston over a period of four days in early June, 2001, was responsible for 22 deaths, 70,000 flood damaged homes and \$5 billion in damage to the region. This paper first assesses the near term policy impacts and response to this societal, ecological and hydrological disaster. Specific questions that are addressed include: what were the media, emergency management, and political responses to the event? How were the causes, and associated blame, defined and assigned? The primary sources of data are media attention during and after the flooding events, relevant policy statements, and indicators of institutional and policy change in response to the event. Second, this paper focuses on the longer term policy changes and impacts such as the redrawing of regional floodplain maps and institutional changes resulting from the event. This paper will also address the lingering influence of Tropical Storm Allison on community reactions to Hurricane Rita, which landed to the east of Houston in 2005, causing significant problems from emergency evacuations and the anticipation of flooding and wind damage. In conclusion, this paper will address the utility of the focusing event framework for assessing policy change over time in the area of natural hazards, and suggest possible avenues

for collaboration and comparative interdisciplinary and international research in urban flooding policy.