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Interdisciplinary study of urban flooding: a focusing event perspective

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This paper will explore the design and application of a focusing event perspective to the complex issue of urban flooding. A “focusing event” as it relates to public policymaking, is an event such as a crisis or disaster that shifts attention away from the status quo. Focusing events such as natural 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, the mobilization of policy communities, the development and/or evolution of institutions and policy shifts in an effort to mitigate/adapt to future events. The focusing event perspective has particular significance to the problem of urban flooding in megacities, as well as in vulnerable coastal areas and communities. Urban areas are constantly constrained in regard to infrastructure decision making, and the occurrence of a major flooding event can interrupt or punctuate the normal policy process.

Using the case of Tropical Storm Allison, a significant flooding event that hit Houston Texas in June 2001, as an example, this paper explores the application of the focusing event perspective from an interdisciplinary perspective. Primarily a social science framework for the study of policy change over time following an event, this paper explores the contribution such an approach can yield from an interdisciplinary application including hazards geography and environmental engineering. The primary questions to be assessed in this paper include: what is the focusing event perspective, how can it be applied in the context of urban flooding, in general, and in the case of Tropical Storm Allison in particular, and can a focusing event perspective contribute to interdisciplinary research and the engineering and decision sciences? In conclu-

sion, 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.