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Cal Poly SLO Plays Major Role in California Disaster Planning

SAN LUIS OBISPO – Cal Poly San Luis Obispo’s City and Regional Planning Department is helping California become a leader in planning for community safety from earthquakes and floods, wildfires and other disasters.

Cal Poly and the Governor’s Office of Emergency Services partnered to revise the California Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan, which recently received final approval from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and designation as an “enhanced” state mitigation plan.

The State of California is now eligible for extra funding in the hazard mitigation grant program during the next three years, according to FEMA Region IX Administrator Nancy Ward. Only a few states have enhanced mitigation plans.

The financial difference between a standard and enhanced plan designation is “huge,” according to City and Regional Planning Department Head William Siembieda. “Not only is it recognition by the federal government that the state is a proactive leader in disaster planning, enhanced status means California will get significantly larger amounts of federal mitigation grant funding after future disasters,” said Siembieda.

The enhanced status represents a significant new source of revenue for improving public safety in the face of a tight state budget year and will result in more funds for cities, counties and special districts in undertaking community safety projects after any new disasters, according to the OES.

Under contract with OES, a team from Cal Poly’s City and Regional Planning Department began revising the state’s hazard mitigation plan in fall 2006. FEMA initially approved the document in Oct. 2007 as a standard plan which met all basic criteria under the Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000. After further review, FEMA granted California enhanced designation, qualifying the state for potentially hundreds of millions of dollars more in mitigation grant funds.

The enhanced plan designation is good until 2010 when the plan must be revised and resubmitted for FEMA review.

Innovative features of the revised California plan include discussions on such issues as levee failures, landslides, tsunamis and climate change. Also new are a geographic information system (GIS) risk assessment, strategic mitigation action list, and detailed accounts of how OES manages federal mitigation funds in a timely, cost-effective manner.

A hazard mitigation success story examined by the Cal Poly team and highlighted in the plan involves a flood barrier wall erected around two mobile home parks in Yountville, preventing any floodwater from entering the park during Napa River flooding in Dec. 2005. Prior to the wall, flooding had caused considerable damage and forced evacuations of elderly residents for many years.

The Cal Poly team estimates a cost savings of approximately \$1.6 million for this single event, a savings which will be multiplied many times over by future repetitive floods in the area, according to Ken Topping, Cal Poly City and Regional Planning Department lecturer and former City of Los Angeles planning director.

"It is much cheaper and less disruptive in the long run to prevent losses from disasters - before they strike - through building safer and more sustainable communities," said Topping.

The California plan is exceptional because it emphasizes protecting the environment, according to Siembieda. Other main goals of the mitigation plan are to significantly reduce life loss and injuries, minimize damage to structures and property from disasters and promote hazard mitigation as an integrated public policy.

The faculty-student Cal Poly team was headed by Topping, Siembieda, and Associate Professor Michael Boswell.

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