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## More trouble for Adirondacks

By JOHN F. SHEEHAN, Commentary

Congressional budget cuts at a little-known federal agency are threatening lives, homes and businesses in the Adirondack Park.

This is especially troublesome in the eastern Adirondacks, where Tropical Storm Irene scoured new river-courses through communities, and where snowmelt caused widespread flooding the previous spring.

The Adirondack Council and local leaders are urging Congress and the Obama administration to replace the tiny federal appropriation that would eliminate this threat. Cuts like these should be unthinkable in the Adirondack Park. But these cuts would degrade public safety far beyond the Adirondacks and Lake Champlain.

Many people have never heard of the U.S. Geological Survey. But if you have ever heard a weather forecaster warn you that a river was about to rise over its banks, you have benefited from its work. If you ever wondered how New York proves to federal regulators that it is reducing the amount of pollution entering big water bodies, like Lake Champlain, it is USGS research and data.

For riverside communities such as Keene Valley, Ausable Forks and Elizabethtown, the USGS could provide maps showing where future flooding is likely to occur. This program, called flood inundation mapping, can be used in cooperation with the Federal Emergency Management Agency to identify which homes and business should have federal assistance in moving out of harm's way.

The maps could help local governments decide how to preserve, or improve, bridges, culverts and roadways prone to erosion from flooding. In turn, that would curb the pressure on highway crews to straighten and widen brooks and streams, which can damage fish habitat and water quality, and damage property downstream.

It would also allow the communities to install a Reverse 911 warning system for residents and businesses in flood-prone areas. Reverse 911 is a system that would automatically place phone calls to those homes and businesses when stream levels reached a certain height. With today's technology, the USGS can do the whole job in most communities for less than \$40,000.

But those measurements require USGS gauges to be in place in the rivers. The good news for the recently flooded Adirondack communities is that the gauges on the Ausable and Boquet rivers were placed there long ago by USGS personnel. But they are about to fall silent.

Because of aggressive budget cutting on the federal level, those gauges are likely to be shut down before the end of March. There are nine inside and just outside the Adirondack Park, from Whitehall north to the Canadian border. Another 18 are slated for closure in the Southern Tier, as well as two in the Lower Hudson Valley and six more on Long Island. The total cost of running the nine Adirondack gauges is about \$134,000 annually. All 30 across the state cost about \$429,000 per year — a pittance for Congress.

Yet the USGS has seen its budget slashed before.

In the past, U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., saved the money for stream gauges with what's known as an earmark. As a champion of Lake Champlain water quality improvements, Leahy was able to gain approval from his colleagues in Congress each year for a small amount of money to be set aside specifically for vital stream measurements on both sides of the lake. Those days are over.

In its zeal to appear that it was making progress on the economy, Congress eliminated earmarks, insinuating that all were a waste of money. While the earmark system was too often abused by powerful interests, Congress has done little to ensure that the crucial environmental and public safety programs they once funded will survive.

That is where you come in. Please urge our congressional delegation and congressional leaders from other states to restore this money.

The Adirondack Park/Lake Champlain region was recognized by the United Nations' Man in the Biosphere Program more than 20 years ago as one of the most important natural areas on Earth — a World Biosphere Reserve. It is time for Congress to treat the area with the same respect.

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