

GARY ESTES: GOING TO EXTREMES TO DELIVER A FLOOD OF INFORMATION

By Mick Klasson, CFM, Consulting Environmental Planner

“Data driven.” That’s how Gary Estes describes himself. It’s a good handle for a man who is himself driving data on extreme precipitation to interested scientists and flood risk managers throughout California. Estes is the founder of the California Extreme Precipitation Symposium, and since 1994 he has worked tirelessly and without pay to bring the symposium to fruition each summer. The symposium was originally known as the California Weather Symposium but was renamed in 2004 to emphasize its focus on extreme precipitation. As Estes says, “I was just going to call it precipitation [symposium] but I said ‘we want to talk about extremes.’ I don’t want to be sitting here saying, ‘well it rained this year.’ Yeah, but it didn’t flood, so it’s not interesting. . . it’s the floods that make the world interesting.”

Estes is now a respected and recognized player in California flood risk management, but it’s a field he came to accidentally. Accidentally, that is, by way of moving to the community of Auburn, California at about the time the US Army Corps of Engineers was proposing a flood-control only dam at a nearby site on the American River where construction of a multi-purpose dam had been halted over fears of the dam’s earthquake safety. As a neighbor of the proposed dam, Estes thought “I wonder if this is a good idea or not?” Not content to just wonder, he began to research the topic. Estes is quick to share credit for his successes with his wife, who as the family’s breadwinner encouraged him to “tilt at windmills,” which he had freely done for other causes.

In this case, while Estes began his research, data came from an unexpected direction. Don Baker, a non-practicing meteorologist, had observed California weather patterns and concluded that, in Estes’s words, “we don’t need to build another dam at Auburn, we just need to use this knowledge about weather patterns to change the operating rules at Fol-

som [the next reservoir downstream] to release water sooner in a flood event because you know it’s going to rain.”

Baker’s prescription resonated with Estes. “When you run a reservoir, the real issue is, how long do you store water, and when do you let it out? So I said, ‘what do you do with this knowledge?’ You can do a press release and have five seconds of fame, and you get it to the people who need to see it?” Instead, Estes contacted the Sierra College Natural History Museum in Rocklin, California, which at the time was hosting weekly science lectures. “So I said, hey, would you guys be willing to host a symposium on extreme precipitation?” After the museum was on board, Estes, an FMA member, contacted the FMA Executive Director at the time, Jim Owen. Owen agreed to help support the symposium as a way of offering an educational opportunity to FMA members. “The idea was it was going to be a one-time deal,” recalls Estes, “but everyone had so much fun, all 55 of us, that I asked ‘Well, do you want to do it again next year?’ and everyone said ‘Yeah, let’s do this. As long as you do the work, Gary, who cares?’”

This month the 18th California Extreme Precipitation Symposium will be held with a theme of “The 1861-1862 Floods: Informing Decisions 150 Years Later.” Estes promises to unveil new research documenting the hydrology for this seminal flood.

After 18 symposia, has Estes’s enthusiasm waned? Not to hear him talk. But, like Warren Buffet, of whom you may also have heard, Estes and the FMA leadership are thinking about succession planning. If you’re data-driven too, wander by the symposium [website](#). Attend the symposium, and say hi to the man in charge. Tell him you’re data driven. You may be in for an interesting couple of decades.





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