This month, as I realized I was running late to get my column to “The Insider” editor, I looked back at previous issues (we’re supposed to recycle, right?). Six years ago this month I observed that one of the clues you might be “getting on in years” professionally speaking, is how often you’re asked how you came to know what you know. My answer is unchanged: experience and a willingness to always keep learning.

What has changed is how often I hear or become aware that people don’t have time to read (not even my Notebook columns!). How can you do your job – conveying technical information and interpreting regulations – without reading? Underneath all floodplain management regulations and building code provisions are the NFIP regulations, good ol’ CFR § 60.3. Regulations are not literature. They’re not subject to wildly varying interpretations of meaning.

Ideally, every person rendering an interpretation of a regulation will give the same answer. Of course, we know that’s not the case. The real world is always coming up with a nuance or scenario that wasn’t precisely anticipated when regulations were written. This is why FEMA produces so many guidance documents – to increase the chances that we’ll rely on documented, acceptable interpretations. Well, that’s one reason. The other is if you don’t apply your regulations properly there may be consequences for your community (probation, suspension) and property owners (increased risk, higher insurance costs).

And so, I think to properly do the job of a floodplain manager you need to be willing to read guidance documents. And by that, I mean actually read – not just do a few keyword searches. Taking the time to actually read is part of your job, especially if you’re new to the field or faced with an unusual situation. Yes, I understand and occasionally succumb to the lure of instantaneous word searches in lengthy documents (more on that later). I also know how risky it can be to do that without also reading the surrounding content.

FEMA no longer produces guidance materials in hardcopy – now they’re all readily available online (just search the publication number). I recommend you print the ones you use most. I keep hard copies of my most-used publications, filled with penciled margin notes. There are benefits to keeping your own notes. One is uniformity when the same question arises in the future, and the other just might be passing your knowledge on to your successor.

Now, about taking the time to read. When was the last time you read an NFIP technical bulletin start to finish? Even the longest ones are only 30-some pages – and that includes diagrams and photographs. Isn’t it worth the hour or so to read it through, at least once? How about the “Substantial Improvement/Substantial Damage Desk Reference (FEMA P-758)”? Have you read it? This manual is, hands-down, one of the most valuable that any floodplain manager can have, packing decades of FEMA guidance into just over 100 pages. I teach a 3- to 4-hour class on it. One of the first things I say to the class is that it’s impossible to teach the entire manual in just a few hours. But it is possible to read it in about four hours ... “class, please turn to page 1.” No, I don’t make them sit there and just read, although doing so would...
yield greater benefits. Many times someone asking my advice has started with “I was told at a training that ...” only to discover the instructor wasn’t teaching based on FEMA guidance.

Six years ago I put together a recommended reading list for newcomers to floodplain management. I’ve updated it below. An introductory reading list isn’t supposed to be the end-all, be-all. But it should cover the basic knowledge every state and local floodplain manager should have. And consultants – before you advise a client (or teach a class), I sure hope you’ve done the research to keep your advice in line with FEMA’s guidance.

We need to know the basics before we advise others. Remember, if what we tell a community official or a property owner is wrong, it’s bad enough that people and property could be at risk, but property owners could end up paying for our lack of understanding through much higher flood insurance premiums. And here’s another hint – right after a flood event is the wrong time to decide to learn the ABCs of floodplain management, especially about handling substantially-damaged buildings.

My suggested reading list is shown below, but always check that you have the most recent version. This list is focused on the fundamentals. What would you add to it for the practicing floodplain manager? I’d appreciate your comments and suggestions for additions.

1. **NFIP Technical Bulletins**, the most frequently used TBs cover flood openings, flood damage-resistant materials, breakaway walls and free-of-obstruction. Do you know there are TBs for dry floodproofing certification, elevators, below-grade parking, wet floodproofing, corrosion-resistant connectors and placement of fill? And then there’s my least favorite, the still-draft after 18 years and misleadingly titled TB for below-grade crawlspace (please, please read the strict limits on allowing this deviation from the basic premise that below-grade areas are basements and basements are not permitted).

2. **FEMA 480**, “NFIP Floodplain Management Requirements, A Study Guide and Desk Reference for Local Officials,” about 15 years old and incomplete in some respects, so be sure to pair with more recent guidance documents.

3. **FEMA P-758**, “SI/SD Desk Reference.”

4. **FEMA 213**, “Answers to Questions about Substantially Improved/Substantially Damaged Buildings,” this is a complete rewrite of the old “green cover” edition.

5. **FEMA P-85**, “Protecting Manufactured Homes from Floods and Other Hazards,” be sure to check out some pre-engineered foundation solutions.


8. **FEMA P-499**, “Homebuilder’s Guide to Coastal Construction,” in a handy fact sheet format, with lots of illustrations and content that are valuable in all flood zones, including riverine communities.

9. **Non-engineered Opening Guide**, chock full of pictures and measurements of common products, not a FEMA publication.

10. For states and communities that enforce building codes, download and review the following from the FEMA Building Science webpage for **Building Code Resources:**
• Flood Excerpts of the 2018, 2015 and 2012 I-Codes (and a checklist that shows how the I-Codes and ASCE 24 meet the minimum NFIP requirements for buildings).

• Highlights of ASCE 24-14 (ASCE 24 is referenced by building codes (order it from the American Society of Civil Engineers).

• Quick Reference Guide: Comparison of Select NFIP & Building Code Requirements for Special Flood Hazard Areas (illustrated).

• Reducing Flood Losses through the International Codes, especially chapter 3 which describes several differences between the I-Codes and the NFIP minimum requirements – FYI, a new edition will be published in the coming weeks.

How to Do Global Searches in Multiple PDFs: Despite my plea for you to read, I understand the reality of word-searches. Plus, since there are a large number of FEMA guidance publications, I’m passing along this handy-dandy tip. I hope it’ll improve the chances you’ll check all the applicable ones. First, be sure you have the most recent versions. Then save a copy of all the pertinent publications in one directory (for starters, download those in the reading list). Next, open Adobe (but not a publication). Click <Edit> and on the dropdown menu, select <Advanced Search> Click the radio button for <All PDF Documents in> and in the drop-down menu select <Browse for location.” Navigate to the directory where you saved the publications. After you select the directory, input the word or phrase and hit <Search>. Every publication in which that word or phrase appears will be returned. Click on one of the search results and that PDF opens to where that word appears (if the word is used a lot, a lot of links will show). Click on the results for all the publications to get a complete picture. The key is to think broadly about what terms are applicable to each issue you’re interested in and do searches on each term.

And there you have it, my just-in-time-for-summer beach reading list. Enjoy!

Submit your own items or suggestions for future topics to column editor Rebecca Quinn, CFM, at rquinn@earthlink.net. Comments welcomed! Explore back issues of the Floodplain Manager’s Notebook.