



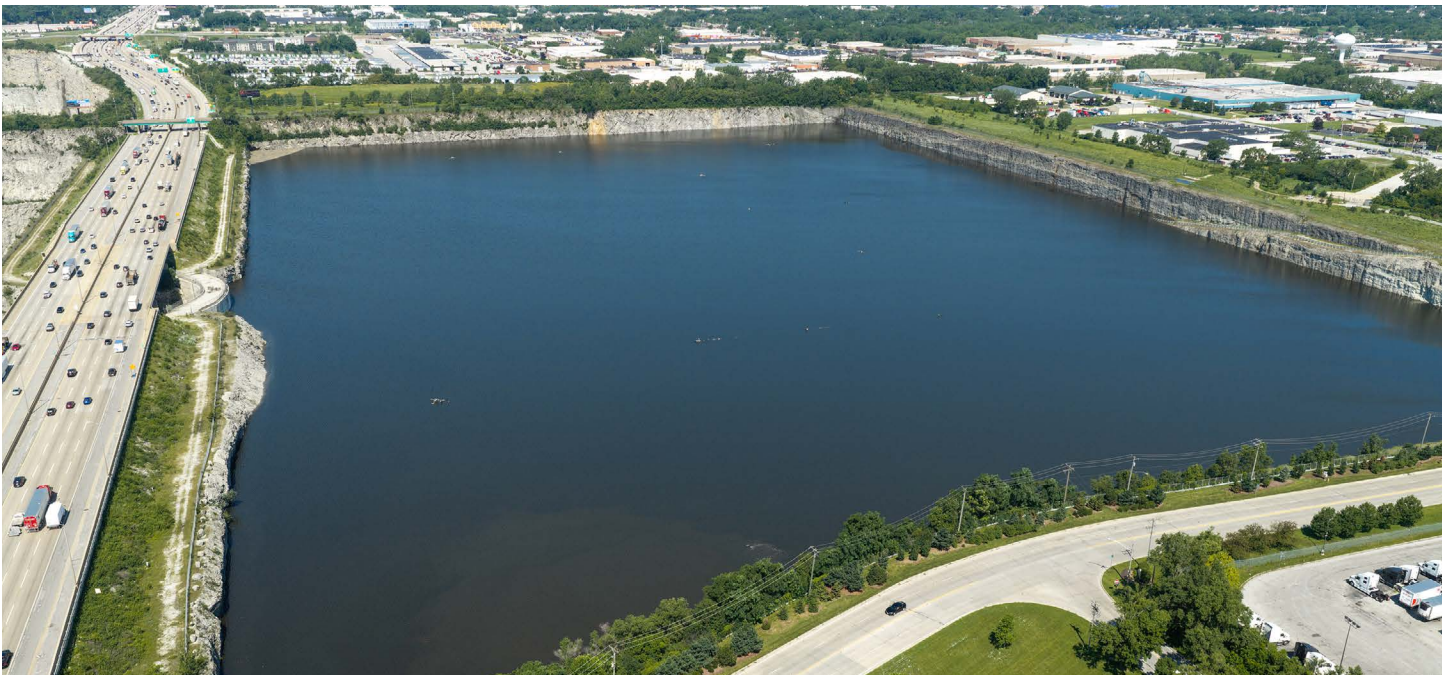
THE IAFSM CURRENT

Illinois Association for Floodplain and Stormwater Management

Fall 2026 Newsletter

The Deluge vs. the Deep Tunnel: Thornton Reservoir Leads MWRD's Defense Against Record Summer Storms

~Pat Thomas and Dan Dorfman, MWRD Office of Public Affairs



The Thornton Reservoir in South Holland, IL reached 94 percent capacity during storms in July 2026, capturing billions of gallons of water and demonstrating its important role in protecting communities and waterways throughout the Calumet region. (Photo looks west; I-294/I-80 is on the south side of the reservoir.)

For southeast Cook County and northwest Indiana, the summer of 2026 will be remembered as a tumultuous period of unpredictable weather, including tornadoes and power outages, severe heat and winds, devastating storms and extraordinary amounts of rain. Much of that rainfall made its way into the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago's (MWRD's) Thornton Reservoir in South Holland, Ill. Between June and August, the reservoir and its tunnels captured more than 15 billion gallons (46,000 acre-feet) of water, enough to fill almost 23,000 Olympic-sized swimming pools. The critical infrastructure reflected its enormous stature and delivered huge protection.

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The Deluge vs. the Deep Tunnel: Thornton Reservoir Leads MWRD's Defense Against Record Summer Storms, Continued...

The Thornton Reservoir nearly filled for the first time during massive storms in early July. The rare sight of water ascending 300 feet up the normally dry limestone walls caused traffic on the Tri-State Tollway (I-294/I-80) to stall as motorists turned for their cameras. Yet that rising water also showcased the decade-long success of the reservoir's capabilities to manage excess water and keep it out of area waterways and basements.



Water rises along the limestone walls of the Thornton Composite Reservoir in South Holland, a former quarry transformed into a critical component of MWRD's Tunnel and Reservoir Plan.

Despite the intense rainfall, there were no combined sewer overflows (CSOs) in the Calumet area, due in large part to the massive hole in the ground that is part of the MWRD's famed Tunnel and Reservoir Plan (TARP), known to many as the "Deep Tunnel." Completed in 2015, the Thornton Reservoir can store up to 7.9 billion gallons (24,200 acre-feet) of water. Working in conjunction with the Calumet Tunnel System, which can store an additional 630 million gallons (1900 acre-feet), the reservoir helps reduce basement backups for communities serviced by combined sewer systems.

It also limits overbank flooding along nearby Thorn Creek, prevents CSOs from spilling into the Calumet River system and protects the source of the region's drinking water in Lake Michigan.

"The weather patterns and devastating flooding this summer pointed to the need for infrastructure like Thornton Reservoir, which once again proved its immense value by taking on billions of gallons of water and keeping it out of our environment," MWRD President Kari K. Steele said. "Without the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan in place, billions of gallons of water would have overwhelmed our communities and waterways."

The severe weather statistics were staggering, especially from July 2 to July 4, when parts of the Chicago area experienced historic rainfall, according to the National Weather Service. The region's south and southwest suburbs were hit particularly hard, following an unusually wet spring that left the area vulnerable to flooding. The region experienced a month's worth of rain on two separate July days followed by heavy rainfall totals in early August.

Thornton Reservoir's large capacity was put to the test as water levels surged to 94 percent of capacity during the July storm, decreased to 32 percent full as it was dewatered after the storm and then rose again to approximately 76 percent full by Aug. 16. MWRD pumps worked to keep up with additional rainfall at the Calumet Water Reclamation Plant, where the water was conveyed to ground level to be treated and cleaned when storms subsided. The volume captured on July 6 shattered the previous record fill of 54.5 percent set in 2019.

The Deluge vs. the Deep Tunnel: Thornton Reservoir Leads MWRD's Defense Against Record Summer Storms, Continued...

The July storm marked another milestone in the Thornton Reservoir's history, reinforcing its importance as one of the MWRD's most significant flood-control facilities. Often referred to as the "Grand Canyon of Chicago's South Suburbs," it is the largest combined sewer reservoir in the world.



An aerial view shows the scale of the Thornton Quarry in South Holland, including the section transformed into the Thornton Composite Reservoir, one of the world's water-storage facilities of its kind.

Located in the northern portion of the Thornton Quarry, the reservoir is separated from the quarry's southern section by I-294/I-80 and has a perimeter of nearly two miles. It receives flow from the MWRD's Calumet Tunnel System, which serves a 91-square-mile combined sewer service area that includes Chicago's Far South Side and 13 surrounding suburbs, serving approximately 556,000 people.

The sheer scale of the Thornton Reservoir underscores its importance. It is large enough to fit six Soldier Field stadiums inside and has the capacity to hold approximately 144 million rain barrels' worth of water. To keep water in the reservoir and prevent groundwater from entering it, the MWRD installed a double-row grout curtain, drilling grout under pressure about 500 feet deep around the two-mile perimeter into a nearly impermeable natural layer of shale that prevents water from escaping. Below the tollway, the MWRD constructed a dam made of roller-compacted concrete that acts as a barrier during fill events and seals an old mining access road. With water reaching record heights, MWRD engineers were on scene tracking and inspecting its performance.

Since operation began in 2015, the Thornton Reservoir has captured about 79 billion gallons (233,200 acre-feet) of combined sewage that otherwise would have entered local waterways. As a result, the system has essentially eliminated CSOs in the Calumet Service Area.

Operating the largest combined sewer reservoir in the world also comes with unforeseen challenges. Although the reservoir performs as designed, MWRD scientists and engineers have studied how to address unpleasant odors that can come with the extraordinary volume of water entering the system. To meet these challenges, the MWRD has invested \$8.6 million in odor control technology and monitoring, including almost \$5 million for carbon scrubber and odor-mitigation systems near the reservoir that are expected to be completed by the end of December 2026.

Since decommissioning the Thornton Transitional Reservoir in 2022, the Thornton Reservoir has taken additional water from Thorn Creek. This helps reduce overbank flooding by diverting floodwater from Thorn Creek to the Thornton Reservoir, where it intermingles with the combined sewage captured by the TARP Tunnels.

The Deluge vs. the Deep Tunnel: Thornton Reservoir Leads MWRD's Defense Against Record Summer Storms, Continued...

For more information about TARP, visit mwrld.org/what-we-do/tunnel-and-reservoir-plan-tarp



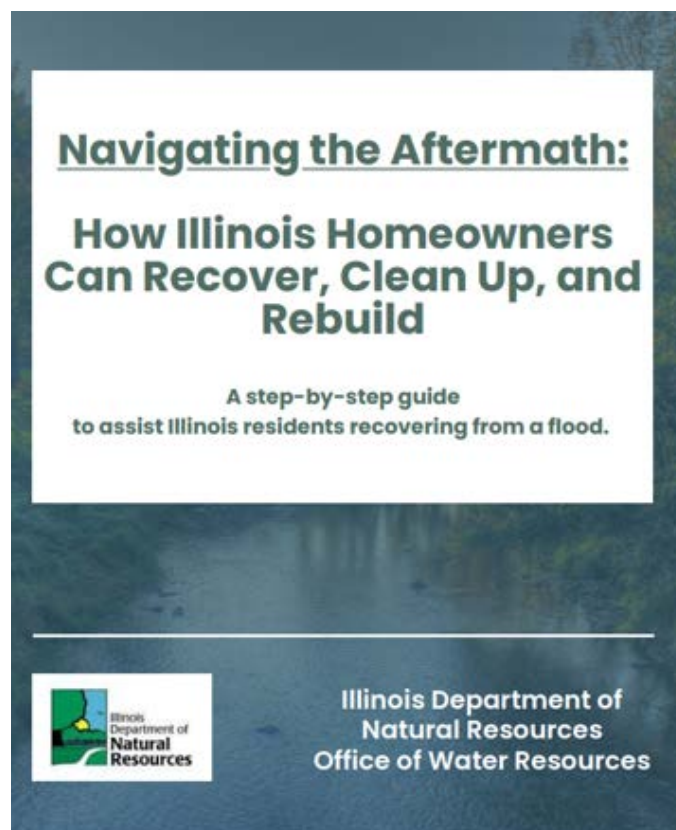
Post-storm Damage Assessment Tools

~Erin Conley, CFM, IDNR

Given the widespread rain events we have seen in the state this summer, here is a reminder of the damage assessment resources the IDNR has available for you.

- The Flood Damage Assessment Package from the IDNR's website at: [Floodplain Management Resources](#). This package walks you through the damage assessment process and has additional outreach resources for you.
- **New to our website is a resident's guide to post flood recovery:** [Navigating the Aftermath: How Illinois Homeowners Can Recover, Clean Up, and Rebuild](#). This is directed at residents and is a detailed guide to a variety of issues that people need to consider as they clean up after a flood in their home.

If you need assistance in navigating the damage assessment process, please reach out directly to Erin Conley, CFM, Illinois State NFIP Coordinator. This is a critical component of a municipality's floodplain management program, and it is important to conduct a review and assessment of all structures in the floodplain. In some areas this can be a daunting task, so if you need more assistance than these guidance documents provide, do not hesitate to ask for help! Contact: Erin.C.Conley@illinois.gov





2027 ANNUAL CONFERENCE



Wednesday, March 10 - Thursday, March 11, 2027



Tinley Park Hotel and Convention Center
18451 Convention Center Drive
Tinley Park, IL 60477



The 2027 Annual Conference is just around the corner! Get involved by submitting an abstract or field trip idea, securing a company sponsorship, and/or reserving a booth in the Exhibitor Hall.



Where: Tinley Park Hotel & Convention Center



When: March 10–11, 2026

Get ready for:

- Engaging presentations from experts across the state
- Hands-on training sessions to sharpen your skills
- Networking opportunities to connect with peers and leaders in the field

★ Important Items:

- Abstracts to speak for 30, 60 or 90 minutes will be accepted until October 9. This is an earlier date than in years past. [Submit your abstract here.](#)
- Field trip ideas are also being sought. [Submit a field trip idea here,](#) accepted until October 9, 2026.
- Sponsorships will be received until November 30, 2026 – secure your visibility at the conference. ([Sponsorship Flyer](#))
IAFSM sends huge appreciation and thanks to CBBEL and Baxter & Woodman who have already committed as 2027 Platinum sponsors. One Platinum spot remains (as of 9/28/26). Thank you for your support!
- Exhibitor spots are available until February 23, 2027 – showcase your work to professionals across Illinois ([Exhibitor Flyer](#))

🎓 Scholarships & Student Discounts

- If you're employed by a local government, you may qualify for an **IAFSM scholarship** to attend. If you're eligible, watch your email for an announcement regarding the scholarship application! <https://forms.gle/PauaajWkpm8sdLd49>
- **Discounted student registration** will also be available – watch for an announcement in 2027!

Conference registration and the hotel block will open in January 2027 and close February 26, 2027. For more information:
<https://www.illinoisfloods.org/events/iafsm-annual-conference>



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From the Chair: Looking Back and Moving IAFSM Forward

~Sharon Østerby, Chair, IAFSM

A Personal Invitation to Participate

As my term as Chair of IAFSM comes to an end, I have been reflecting on what service to this organization has meant to me. I am especially grateful for the members who share their ideas, contribute their time, and help move our profession forward. Many of my most rewarding professional relationships and experiences began with volunteering, joining a conversation, or saying yes to an opportunity.

Service is not only about completing tasks. It is also about building connections, learning from colleagues, and contributing to an organization that supports floodplain and stormwater professionals across Illinois. I hope my experience encourages you to consider how you might become more involved with IAFSM.

Join a Committee

One meaningful way to serve is by joining an IAFSM committee. Committee members support conferences and educational programs, follow legislative and policy developments, advance technical initiatives, and strengthen member outreach. For newer and early career professionals, the Young Professionals Committee can be a natural starting point for meeting colleagues and becoming more connected with IAFSM.

Committee involvement can reflect your experience, interests, and availability. What matters most is your willingness to share ideas and help where you can. Every contribution strengthens our organization.

Serve on the Executive Board

Serving on the IAFSM Executive Board is another meaningful way to contribute. Board members help shape the association's priorities, programs, finances, partnerships, and long term direction while representing floodplain and stormwater professionals across Illinois. The role requires commitment, but it also offers the opportunity to work with dedicated colleagues, build leadership skills, and help guide IAFSM's future.

Continuing the Work

As I transition from Chair to Past Chair, I am grateful to the members who have supported me and to those who continue to give their time and talents to IAFSM. Their service is a reminder that the strength of our organization comes from the people who are willing to participate.

Whether you are continuing your involvement, exploring a new role, or participating for the first time, there is a place for you. Your experience and perspective matter. I encourage you to visit the IAFSM website or contact a committee chair or Executive Board member to learn more about ways to serve.



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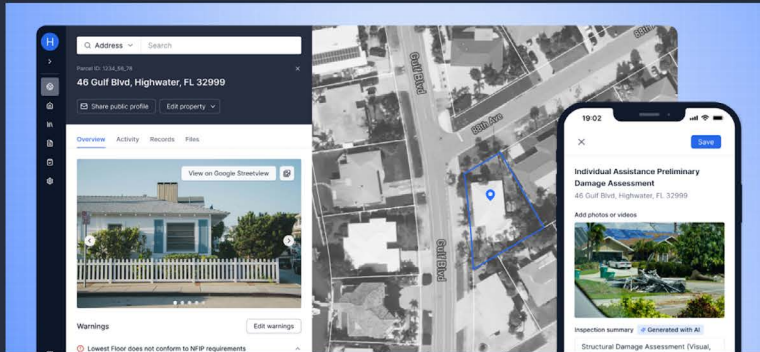
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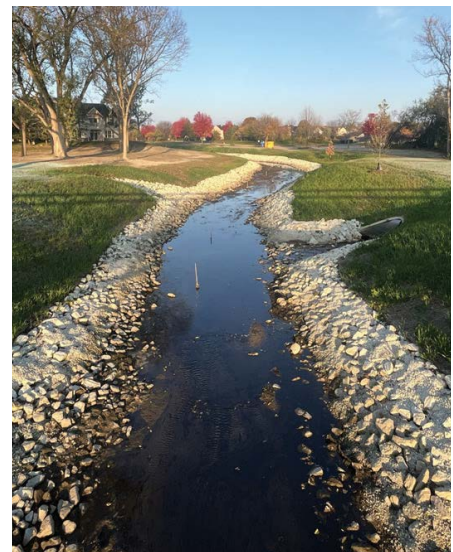


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IAFSM Annual Awards

Awards Season is approaching! Nominate Your Peers and Colleagues for Stormwater and Floodplain Management Awards, for recognition at our 2027 conference in March!

Do you know someone who has made notable contributions to furthering the goals and missions of IAFSM? Nominate them now! All nominations and references are to be submitted online or via email. Nominations are now being accepted for the awards listed below. Nominations for the following categories are due by January 8, 2027. Please visit <https://www.illinoisfloods.org/membership/awards> for more information.



- Floodplain Manager of the Year: Recognizes outstanding individual efforts and contributions at the local level in the area of floodplain management.
- Young Professional of the Year: The Young Professional of the Year Award to recognize the achievements of IAFSM professionals and graduate students under the age of 35!
- Stormwater Management: Awarded to an individual or group who have improved stormwater management or reduced urban flood risks through creative engineering, regulatory measures, or other approaches.
- Mitigation: Given to an individual or community that has encouraged flood hazard reduction through a buyout program, retrofitting, preparation of a mitigation plan, or other similar mitigation efforts.
- Outstanding Service: Awarded to an IAFSM Officer, a Federal, State, or Local Official, or a consultant who has gone above and beyond normal expectations and duties to promote or encourage IAFSM goals.
- Journalism or Public Outreach Award: Given to a media outlet that has produced floodplain or stormwater management special features during the year. The award can include individuals or agencies who have contributed to outreach and public awareness of floodplain or stormwater management issues.
- Legislation: Honors Illinois lawmakers or local officials for their efforts in floodplain issues. The award can also be given to an individual who makes extraordinary efforts to encourage the passage of legislation or to a community that has adopted unique local regulations that promote floodplain management or flood damage reduction.
- French and Mary Lu Wetmore Award for Lifetime Achievement: This award is the IAFSM's highest honor. It is reserved for outstanding longtime floodplain managers. These individual's long-term contributions have made a noticeable impact on floodplain and stormwater management efforts in the State of Illinois. This award is not always given on a yearly basis.

Congrats to Cleighton Smith, a founding IAFSM member

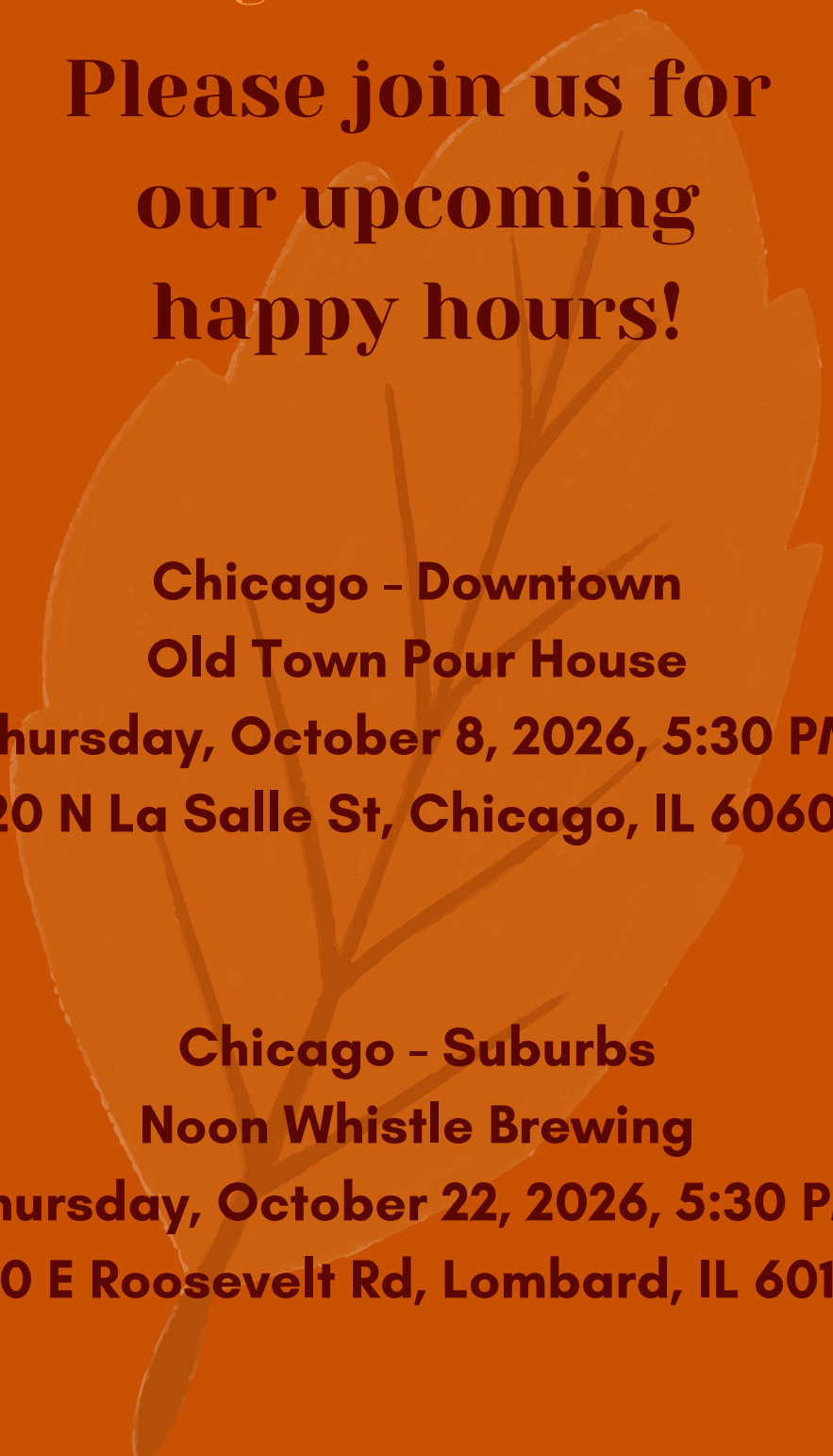
Congratulations to Cleighton Smith, who is being recognized this fall as the winner of the Lifetime Achievement Award from the New Jersey Association for Floodplain Management. Longtime IAFSM members may remember Cleighton from the early days of his career in Illinois, where he was a water resources engineer who worked on several original Flood Insurance Studies, LOMCs, and IDNR floodplain permits. Work on the original FIS and maps included outreach with FEMA and DNR at mapping meetings where he strived to make the new maps understandable to the general public. He was also an original member of IAFSM and was their first Chair of their Awards Committee. Cleighton served as Chair of IAFSM from 1997 to 1999 and received their Outstanding Service Award in 1999. He was an active member of IAFSM until his move to NJ in 2004.

The New Jersey award recognizes his many years of professional service and his significant contributions to floodplain management, engineering, and the advancement of resilient communities throughout that state. Over the course of his career, his technical expertise, professional leadership, and commitment to sound floodplain management practices have earned the respect of colleagues and made a lasting contribution to the communities and professionals he has served.

Congrats Cleighton!

IAFSM
Young Professionals

**Please join us for
our upcoming
happy hours!**



Chicago - Downtown
Old Town Pour House

Thursday, October 8, 2026, 5:30 PM
120 N La Salle St, Chicago, IL 60602

Chicago - Suburbs
Noon Whistle Brewing

Thursday, October 22, 2026, 5:30 PM
800 E Roosevelt Rd, Lombard, IL 60148



Please contact Alana Rosenbaum at
ypg@illinoisfloods.org with any questions



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CFM Exam Prep Webinar – November 4

-from ASFPM News & Views, August 15, 2026

Interested in becoming a Certified Floodplain Manager, but aren't sure where to start?

Join ASFPM on Nov. 4 for the free quarterly CFM exam prep webinar to gain the knowledge and insights you need to take the exam with confidence. During the two-hour virtual workshop, you'll get advice on how to prepare for the exam, learn about the types of questions you can expect to see, and receive tips on maintaining your certification.



The results speak for themselves: Since this exam prep initiative started in 2023, people who attend either the live or on-demand course and take the exam within 6-8 weeks have up to a 25% higher pass rate!

Don't leave your preparation to guesswork—learn from the source. Advance registration is required. Click the link for more details about the course and to register. [Register here.](#)

ASFPM at 50: Stories, Milestones and Memories

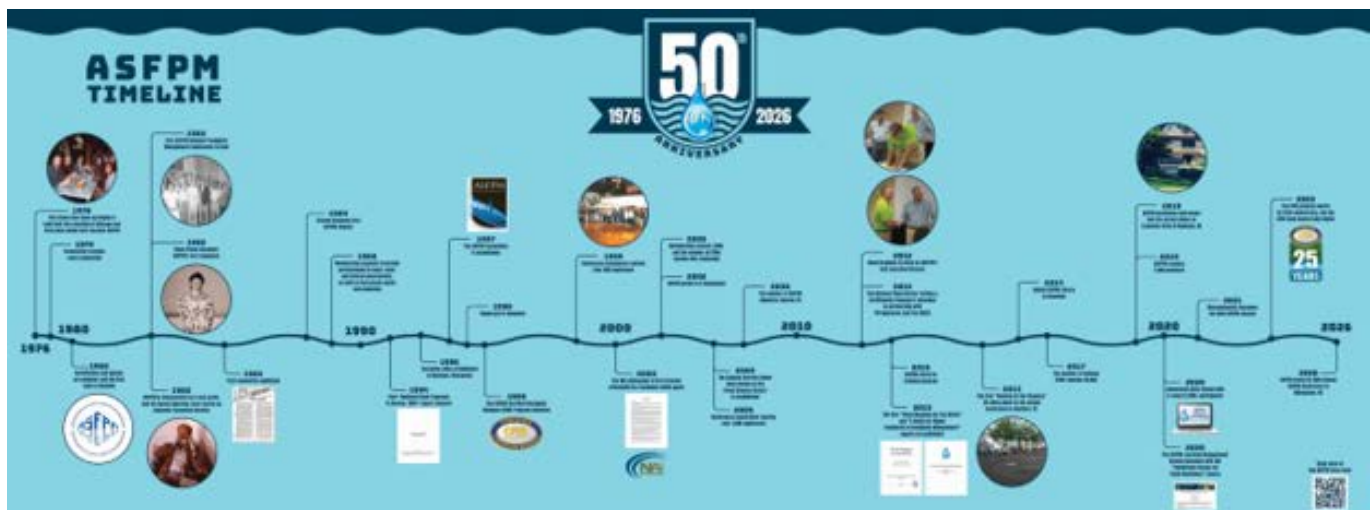
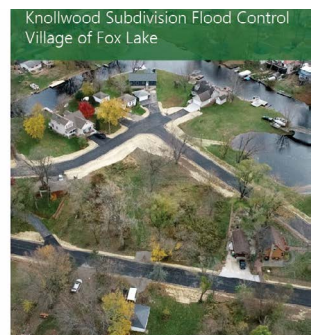
The Association of State Floodplain Managers (ASFPM) began in 1976 when a group of state floodplain managers from the Midwest, all with strong state programs, grew concerned that the current federal policies and programs were not effective at reducing flood losses. They set out to create a national association focused on educating policy makers, coordinating with federal agencies, providing a peer exchange of ideas, and promoting the science underpinning effective floodplain management and mapping to reduce flood losses to life and property — and those ideals remain at the heart of the association today.

ASFPM built a special webpage to celebrate their 50th anniversary. [Click here](#) to reflect on where we've been, celebrate what we've accomplished together, and look ahead to what's next. Explore resources to revisit our history, recognize the people who made it possible, and join us in celebrating five decades of impact.

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CEC Education & Training Opportunities

Looking for training opportunities? The following opportunities are coming up in the next few months. If you are looking for credits, be sure to review the material and confirm they meet the appropriate requirements.

IAFSM/ASFPM Sponsored Training Opportunities:

- IAFSM Annual Conference March 10-11, 2027, Tinley Park
- ASFPM Annual Conference May 23-27, 2027, Pittsburgh, PA

Illinois DNR Webinars:

A series of FREE one-hour virtual training courses on floodplain management topics will be offered through April 2027 with most trainings held on Tuesdays from 10–11 a.m. IDNR requires registration, but you can register up to the day (and hour) of the webinar. The one-hour webinars are eligible for one hour of CEC for CFMs.

- [Local Floodplain Permitting](#): Tuesday, October 20, 10:00-11:00am
- [Substantial Improvement Explained](#): Tuesday, November 17, 10:00-11:00am
- [Substantial Damage Plan for Local Communities](#): Tuesday, December 15, 10:00-11:00am
- To view the entire **IDNR 2026 – 2027 webinar series** – [Register](#)

EMI Training Opportunities:

EMI provides a wide range of training opportunities and upcoming training. EMI courses are free for local and state government employees. Learn more at the EMI website:

<http://training.fema.gov/emicourses/>

- [E0273: Managing Floodplain Development through the NFIP – Nov 2-5, 2026](#)

Additional Webinars

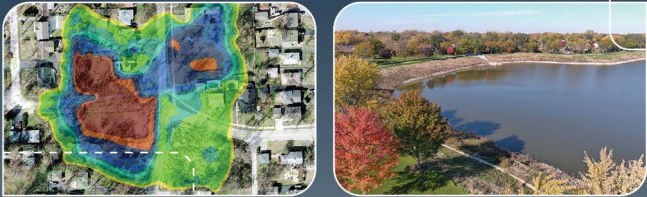
- ASFPM – <https://www.floods.org/training-education/online-training/asfpm-webinars/>
- ASFPM is offering additional at home training. For information, see the link below: <https://floods.redvector.com/>
- Also...ASFPM has On Demand Learning seminars that would be of interest to current and future CFM's. Check it out at [On-Demand Learning \(floods.org\)](#)
- Other training and CEC opportunities can be found on ASFPM's calendar: <http://www.floods.org/n-calendar/calendar.asp?>



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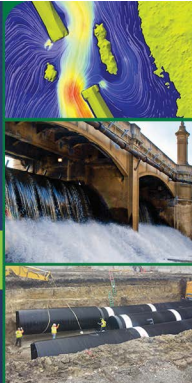


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Important Stuff We Tell You in Every Newsletter...

2027 Annual IAFSM Conference

The 2027 Annual IAFSM Conference will be March 10-11, 2027 in Tinley Park, Illinois. Save the date!

Wanted: Newsletter Ideas & Articles

IAFSM members, this is YOUR newsletter! Email Jennifer Maercklein, editor, at newsletter@illinoisfloods.org if there are topics that you'd like us to cover. You don't need to write the article - we just want your ideas! If you're gifted with a pen and would like to provide content, we welcome your written contributions as well.

Get Involved with IAFSM!

IAFSM Committee Chairs welcome your help and involvement. See the list of chairs on the last page of this newsletter, or visit the committee webpage to learn more about volunteer opportunities: <http://www.illinoisfloods.org/committees.html>.

Borrow our Water Table

IAFSM has five Watershed Tabletop Models available for all members to check out (free of charge) and bring to Public Works Open Houses, Scout meetings, 4-H meetings, school classrooms, etc. This offers a great opportunity to educate about the dangers and impact of unplanned development and human activity in the floodplain. IAFSM currently keeps tables in Fallfield, Champaign, Bartlett, Woodridge, and Swansea. Contact Amanda King at IAFSM@illinoisfloods.org to make arrangements.

Next Board Meeting

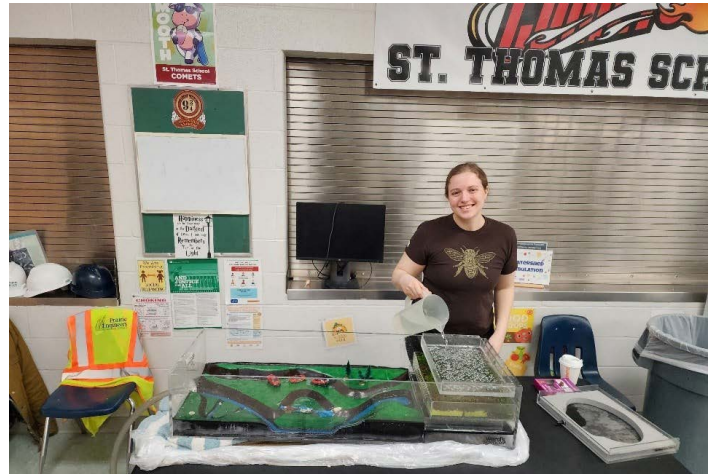
The next IAFSM Board Meeting will be held via Zoom on November 11th at 10am. Join us! All members are welcome and encouraged to attend. Contact Amanda King for the zoom link: IAFSM@illinoisfloods.org.

Jobmart

Visit our Jobmart at illinoisfloods.org/jobmart.html. Jobmart is a free service to members of IAFSM. To post an open position, please sign into our website and complete the job listing form. If you have any questions please contact Amanda at IAFSM@illinoisfloods.org.

CFM Exams

Exams are online and can be taken in your home or office (monitored by an online proctor) or at a testing center; there are many testing centers in Illinois. For information, visit www.illinoisfloods.org/certification.html. For training materials, contact Greg Thorpe: certification@illinoisfloods.org



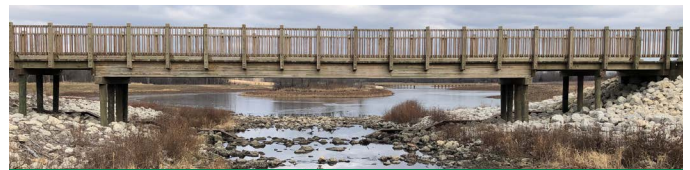
Sarah Wenzel brought the IAFSM water table to St. Thomas Middle School's Science Palooza event in Peoria Heights and demonstrated to students and parents how different surfaces can affect water runoff in an interactive exhibit.



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THE IAFSM CURRENT

Illinois Association for Floodplain and Stormwater Management

Fall 2026 Newsletter

The IAFSM Newsletter is published quarterly for members of the Illinois Association for Floodplain and Stormwater Management. Information and opinions contained herein do not necessarily reflect the views of all members. Items for publication and other editorial matters should be directed to the editor at newsletter@illinoisfloods.org.

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