Peter J. May
Center for American Politics and Public Policy
Department of Political Science
Campus Box 353530
University of Washington
Seattle, WA 98195-3530 USA
pmay@u.washington.edu
206-543-9842 Fax: 206-685-2146

Risk Management Strategies in an Uncertain World Roundtable
Policy Design and Implementation Perspectives

My perspectives are those of a political scientist who has for 20 years been researching the design and implementation of policies concerning risks posed by natural hazards. My involvement began with the eruption of Mount St. Helens and has continued with research concerning the politics of disaster relief, implementation of national disaster policy, design and implementation of earthquake risk reduction measures, enforcement of and compliance with building codes, and challenges and prospects presented by performance-based earthquake engineering. I have also undertaken comparative study of hazard management programs in Australia and New Zealand, as well as participated in a variety of governmental and other reviews of hazards policies and management in the United States.

My perspectives are perhaps best presented as a set of selected lessons that I derive from the various studies that I have undertaken:

1. *A shared governance dilemma constrains effective national policies for risk management in general and hazard mitigation in particular.* The basic dilemma is that on the one hand the federal interest is in promoting intelligent risk management and hazard mitigation, if only to reduce federal relief and recovery costs from catastrophic events. On the other hand, the steps to mitigate against harm must be taken at local levels of government and among private entities for which the commitment to such action is varied at best. These issues are low on local governmental agendas and often the money to take effective action does not exist. The net result is a "commitment conundrum" that reflects varying commitment and capacity to address a range of risks. Incentive grant programs based on applicant initiative reward those entities that have the capacity to seeks such funds and often only exacerbate the gap between "leaders" and "laggards" among local governments in risk reduction efforts.

   These perspectives are developed in:

   Environmental Management and Governance: Intergovernmental Approaches to Hazards and Sustainability (London and New York: Routledge Press, 1996); Peter J. May et al.

   Disaster Policy Implementation: Management Strategies Under Shared Governance (New York: Plenum Press, 1986); Peter J. May and Walter Williams.

"Intergovernmental Environmental Planning: Addressing the Commitment Conundrum," *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* 41 (January 1998): 95-110; Raymond J. Burby and Peter J. May.

2. *Noteworthy gaps between policies on paper and in practice exist at all levels of government for hazard mitigation and disaster preparedness policies.* This "implementation gap," while common to public policies, is as great in this arena as for any. Added to this is the fact that the adoption of risk reduction policies addressing natural and other hazards is variable at state and local levels. This gap calls attention to the importance of thinking about implementation issues as part of policy design and for evaluations of the extent of implementation of existing programs.

   These perspectives are developed in:

   "Regulatory Backwaters: Earthquake Risk Reduction in the Western United States," *State and Local Governmental Review,* 32 (Winter 2000): 20-33. Peter J. May and T. Jens Feeley.

   "State Regulatory Roles: Choices in the Regulation of Building Safety," *State and Local Government Review* 29 (Spring 1997): 70-80; Peter J. May.

   "Earthquake Risk Reduction: An Examination of Local Regulatory Efforts," *Environmental Management* 18, 6 (1994): 923-937; Peter J. May and Thomas A. Birkland.

   "Reassessing Earthquake Hazards Reduction Measures," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 52 (Autumn 1986): 443-451; Peter J. May and Patricia T. Bolton.

3. *The governmental agenda for addressing risks that have had catastrophic occurrences is driven by the politics surrounding those occurrences, rather than by evaluation of risks/losses across the broader spectrum.* This is much like the "disease of the month" phenomenon that drives health care policy and politics, or "environmental crisis of the year" that drives environmental policy and politics. The obvious point is the need for more balanced analysis to inform policy debates and better information about potential losses from catastrophic events.

   These perspectives are developed in:

   Recovering From Catastrophes: Federal Disaster Relief Policy and Politics, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985; Peter J. May.

   "Addressing Natural Hazards: Challenges and Lessons for Public Policy," *The Australian Journal of Emergency Management* 11 (Summer 1996/7): 30-37; Peter J. May.

   "Addressing Public Risks: Federal Earthquake Policy Design," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 10 (Spring 1991): 263-285; Peter J. May.

4. *It is useful to consider lessons from policies outside of the hazards and disaster arena when thinking about policy design for addressing potential harms from extreme events.* The hazards and disaster community tends to be fairly insular and tends to think of hazards policies as particularly unique aspects of public policymaking. While there are some unique aspects, particularly with respect to the politics of this policymaking, the generic policy design issues are similar to those in other arenas. The lessons from those experiences that confront parallel issues of low probability, high consequence chronic events are therefore important to consider.

   This perspective is developed in:

   "Policy Design for Earthquake Hazard Mitigation: Lessons from Energy Conservation, Radon Reduction, and Termite Control," *Earthquake Spectra*, vol. 14 (November 1998): 629-650; Peter J. May, Raymond J. Burby, and Howard Kunreuther.

5. *A concept that often comes up in the discussion of goals for addressing catastrophic risks is the concept of "acceptable risk." Posing the problem as one of defining acceptable levels of risk is problematic, particularly when applied at the societal level.* There is a fundamental Catch-22 in addressing acceptable levels of risk. On the one hand, determining these is fundamentally a value judgment that requires some form of collective decision-making. On the other hand, knowledge of relevant risk considerations, technical details, and costs and benefits are important for establishing meaningful goals. The first consideration argues for public processes for establishing safety goals. The second argues for deference to technical experts. Finding the appropriate middle ground is a serious challenge. A recasting of the discussion of acceptable risk is important for advancing discussion of how to address catastrophic risks.

   This perspective is developed in:

   "Societal Perspectives About Earthquake Risk: The Fallacy of 'Acceptable Risk'," *Earthquake Spectra*, 17 (November 2001): 725-737; Peter J. May