

Opinion & Analysis

Talk of 'once-off' flooding offers only false comfort



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Extreme weather events are increasingly inevitable, yet our level of preparation for them is farcical

WHILE MUCH of the western seaboard is struggling to cope with the worst flooding ever experienced, a Galway County Council meeting this week heard a novel suggestion, tabled by a Fine Gael councillor. His proposal was that perhaps it would be a good idea to consider not issuing planning permission for new housing in areas currently under water. Myles na gCopaleen would surely have applauded.

This may sound comical now, but it's hard to escape the suspicion that no sooner has this wave of flooding abated than it will be back to business as usual. Ireland, it seems, suffers from a communal allergy to planning.

The last week or so has given us a taste of the tragic consequences of our farcical non-preparedness for severe weather events. These events are not just predictable; they are in fact increasingly inevitable. Back in 2004, the report of the Flood Policy Review Group was highly critical of the less than €20 million invested in flood planning and prevention for all of 2003. The review group estimated that necessary flood relief works would require a €300 million investment.

At that time the country was awash with money, not water, yet the political response was indifference. For 2005, flood relief works investment actually fell, to just €16 million,

then €14 million by 2006 – a pittance by any measure. To put these sums in context, consider that the losses to date in this month's flooding are running at well over €100 million.

Factor in the uninsurable costs, including the huge loss of productivity from entire towns and communities, and it is probable that the overall bill for this one month will exceed the entire €300 million figure that the review group five years ago said was needed to upgrade flood relief works in the first place.

Minister for the Environment John Gormley described the current flooding as "an act of God", a once-in-800-year event. Both descriptions may have been poorly chosen. Carlow and Clonmel, for instance, have been inundated, principally due to inadequate flood defences. Kilkenny city, in contrast, has been spared, thanks to expensive flood protection measures that are today looking like very good value indeed. Across the country, new housing estates are under water mainly because they were recklessly located on flood plains. These extreme weather events are being fuelled by spiralling emissions from human activity. Why blame God?

Dr Gerald Fleming of Met Éireann is annoyed about the current floods being talked up as once-off events – it gives the public, planners and politicians an entirely false

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comfort that this is unlikely to happen again in our lifetimes. "When you look at the records even over the last 15-20 years, you can see clearly that the statistics look very different to what has gone before," says Fleming. The past, he told me, can no longer be relied on as a guide for likely future events.

What is perhaps most worrying about the current flooding is that it hasn't been as a result of a fierce storm system. Instead, after an unusually dry September, six weeks of above average rainfall caused the water table to rise nationally. Then, with rain up by 300 per cent in November, the deluge simply

overwhelmed many rivers and lakes, as the land could no longer absorb the downpour. When bad weather meets bad planning and bad politics, don't expect good outcomes.

The other aspect of November has been the unseasonably high air temperatures. Warmer air carries more moisture, which accounts for the intense nature of recent rainfall. Climate expert Dr Kieran Hickey is based in Galway. The rainfall he witnessed this week he described as "semi-tropical". Hickey confided his suspicion that "climatically, things are changing much faster than people think".

A Met Éireann/UCD study on climate predictions for the 21st century published last year predicted winter rainfall increases in the range of 15-20 per cent "towards the end of the century". This is already looking very conservative. The Irish Sea is now warming at the extraordinary rate of 0.6-0.7 degrees per decade; this is pumping large amounts of new energy into our hydrological cycle. And, as we've found to our cost, what goes up, must indeed come down. Even when we are up to our waists in the tangible evidence of climate disruption, there is still an influential rump whose refusal to accept even the most basic science is hampering our ability to respond.

The one group of scientists who are both skilled in media and trusted by the general

public are weather forecasters. In September the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) urged its members to go beyond the weather and communicate the profound implications of climate change to the public.

Fleming took part in that conference, and says this idea has been raised "at an informal level within RTÉ" but points out that, as civil servants, forecasters are precluded from engaging in what might be construed as political debate. Farcically, with the experts effectively gagged, this leaves much of the commentary in the hands of a highly opinionated few who seek to shape national policy on the caprice of their personal opinions rather than what scientists say.

John Gibbons blogs at the aptly named www.thinkorswim.ie

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