

For Immediate Release

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WITH RISING FLOODWATERS COMES A WARNING TO MOTORISTS

New Study Underscores Danger of Driving Is Greatest in and around Floodwaters.

November 10, 2015, BOSTON, MA – The recent major flooding events in several states on the Atlantic coast, as well as the vast flooding across Texas, show the deadliness of rising waters. Nonetheless, a new study shows that far too often people are entering dangerous floodwaters voluntarily—especially in their cars. Based on a review of documented behavior in and around flooding, the study advocates changes to how the public is educated about the dangers of floods so people make better choices.

The new study published this month by the American Meteorological Society in its journal *Weather, Climate, and Society* notes that, in the United States, motor vehicle drivers in particular are likely to take risks when confronting flooded streets or roadways. The majority of American flood deaths (76%) involve motor vehicles, the study noted. That translates to a particularly big problem for drivers in Texas, which has three times the number of deaths related to floodwaters than any other state.

More than half of vehicle-related deaths in floods occur at night, when it is difficult to judge fast-changing dangers. Compounding the perception problem, Americans tend to believe it is safe to drive through flooded roads, in part because they often mistakenly trust in the safety of their SUVs and other large vehicles. Also, victims tend to be driving on familiar roads, and people often interpret road signs as indicating the likelihood, but not the severity, of flooding ahead.

Since a significant number of flood-related deaths have been linked to avoidable behavior, these multiple ways of making fatal mistakes on the road presents challenges for city leaders and emergency managers to better inform the public. While the report acknowledged numerous public education campaigns, including “Turn Around Don’t Drown,” coordinated by the National Weather Service, none of these campaigns have documented their outcomes. The paper concludes, “it is difficult to say what kind of impact they are having.”

The authors, who are based at the Joint Centre for Disaster Research in Wellington, New Zealand; the University of Colorado; and the New South Wales State Emergency Service, recommend that flood educators:

- Emphasize the actual dangers and consequences of entering floodwater.
- Bolster social norms to discourage entering floodwater.
- Engage multiple and influential social channels.
- Focus on males, the young, the old, and motor vehicle drivers.
- Enhance training of people who work in flood situations.
- Account for the ways people consider and filter warning messages.
- Prepare drivers prior to warnings to find alternate route options.

Read the full article, [“A Review of People’s Behavior in and around Floodwater,”](#) by Julia S. Becker et al., in the October 2015 issue of *Weather, Climate, and Society*.

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