

Central Water Commission's (CWC) non-existent Flood Forecasting in Uttarakhand

Central Water Commission, India's premier technical body under Union Ministry of Water Resources, has once again failed in the Uttarakhand flood disaster. Even as the Uttarakhand state faced the worst floods in its history, CWC, which has been given the task of forecasting floods across flood prone areas all over India, completely failed in making any forecasts that could have helped the people and administration in Uttarakhand.

First principle of disaster management is prior warning. With prior warning, significant proportion of possible damages and destruction can be avoided. In that respect, one expected that CWC would play a key role in forecasting the floods. SANDRP has been monitoring CWC flood forecasts throughout the monsoon for some years. During June 15-17, 2013, when Uttarakhand was receiving the floods, CWC did not make any forecasts regarding Uttarakhand. As far as the most severely disaster affected areas of Ganga basin upstream of Devprayag are concerned (these include the worst affected Kedarnath and Mandakini valley, the Gangotri and Bhagirathi valley and Badrinath in Alaknanda valley), CWC has made no flood forecasts at all this year. Same is the case regarding other affected regions of Uttarakhand including Yamuna basin including Yamunotri and Pithoragarh including Goriganga basin. What is then the role of this premier technical body tasked with flood forecasting?

The only forecast that CWC made for Uttarakhand this June 2013 were for Rishikesh and Haridwar on June 18, 2013. Even in these instances, CWC's callousness is reflected. Normally when flood forecasts are made for any site in the first place, the forecasts would be low flood forecast (where water level is between warning and danger level for the site), and only in next stage, would medium flood forecast would be made (water level above danger level). However, in case of both Rishikesh and Haridwar, CWC straightaway made medium flood forecasts, missing the low flood forecasts.

In fact looking at the CWC flood forecasting site (<http://www.india-water.com/ffs/index.htm>), we notice that in entire Uttarakhand state, CWC has only three flood forecasting sites: Srinagar, Rishikesh and Haridwar, which means CWC would not be making any forecasts for the most vulnerable regions of Uttarakhand in any case! Even in case of Srinagar (which actually suffered the worst floods with hundreds of damaged houses), CWC site says the Highest flood level is 536.85 m, amazingly, below the warning level of 539 m! This means that even if water level goes above HFL, it won't forecast any floods since level could still be well below the warning level?

The callous performance of CWC does not end there. During June 2-7 this year, CWC flood forecasting site as also the flood forecasting site of NDMA which also depends on CWC, stopped functioning. After numerous emails and phone calls from SANDRP, the website started functioning again on June 7, 2013 and Shri V D Roy, Director (Flood Forecasting Management) of CWC wrote to us, "Due to technical reasons, the CWC FF site was not working since 2nd June. With consistent effort, the website was made functional w e f 7th June".

Pointing out a major blunder of CWC, we had written to CWC on June 12, 2013, "CWC forecast site reported that water level of Brahmaputra river at Neamatighat site in Jorhat district in Assam had reached 94.21 m at 0900 hrs (on June 11, 2013), which was 6.84 m above the highest flood level of the site at 87.37 m. The FF site also forecast that the level will be 94.15 m at 0900 am on June 12, 2013, that is today. Both the recording and forecast were clearly wrong, rather way off the mark. The site or the area in question or upstream and downstream levels do not match with what the CWC site said y'day." Needless to add there were no floods in Brahmaputra on June 11, 2013, in spite of such forecast by India's highest technical body! CWC is yet to respond to our emails on this issue. Instead of putting its house in order, CWC is acting as a lobby for big dams by making baseless claims about Tehri dam having saved downstream area of floods, as reported by Indian Express[i] on June 25, 2013. This is like adding salt to the wounds of the people of Uttarakhand who are suffering from the ill effects of lopsided development including dams and hydropower projects. It would be better if CWC tries to improve its flood forecasts rather than indulging in such lobbying efforts at such times of crisis.

CWC needs to seriously consider including key sites of Uttarakhand into its flood forecasting sites, even if the the duration available for such forecasting is smaller. In times of crisis even a few hours notice can save many lives and also help save other losses.