

Flood Awareness Month – PODCAST 5: River Forecasting Centers

RUN TIME: 1 MIN 35 SECONDS

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JEFF JOHNSON: So how are the forecasts made? Are they done at the National Weather Service offices in Iowa, or are they done elsewhere?

JEFF ZOGG: The river forecasts are actually done as a collaborative effort within the National Weather Service. The actual model itself – and that’s the centerpiece of our forecasting ability – resides at the River Forecast Center, and there are 13 River Forecast Centers across the United States, two of which serve Iowa. The Mississippi River Basin is served by River Forecast Center in the Twin Cities and the Missouri River portion of Iowa is served by the River Forecast Center in Kansas City. But that model takes into account observed and forecast rainfall as well as land use, topography, soil moisture – all those variables that are important in forecasting the river. Then the output is shared with the National Weather Service offices such as the one in Des Moines and the other five that serve the state of Iowa. And the role of those offices is to add value to the forecast. The local offices are going to use local expertise – experience based on past flood events – to take a look at the numbers we’re receiving from the models and ask ourselves if they make sense. Based on what we’re seeing here, do these numbers make sense? Does it make sense with what we’ve seen in past experiences? We may do some coordination with our counterparts at the River Forecast Centers to tweak those numbers. We’ll also rely heavily on local people, too – the emergency managers. There’s a lot of people that have lived along the river for a long period of time and they have a lot of knowledge as to how that river responds. And one way we do that is by tapping the local officials, too, as part of the river forecasting process. So it’s not a case of the river forecast passing directly through the local office to the public. It actually comes to the local office, we take a look at it, add our knowledge and expertise to it, and then send it out to the public.