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State Issues Health and Safety Tips as Residents Return Home from Recent Floods

SPRINGFIELD – After historic flooding in Winnebago and Stephenson counties forced hundreds of people from their homes, the State of Illinois is urging residents in and around the flood zones to take precautions as the clean-up begins.

“The floods in the northern Illinois have turned lives upside-down and devastated neighborhoods,” said Alicia Tate-Nadeau, Acting Director of the Illinois Emergency Management Agency. “As residents begin to return home, people in these areas need to take steps protect themselves from disease and other environmental hazards often associated with floodwaters.”

It is important that homeowners realize that floodwaters and sewer overflows can contain bacteria, fecal material, viruses and other organisms that may cause disease. The Illinois Emergency Management Agency (IEMA), Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) and Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA), can provide important guidance for residents looking to return home and begin damage assessments.

“Flood waters can contaminate or damage food, water, house appliances, and just about anything it touches,” said IDPH Director Dr. Ngozi Ezike. “To avoid illness it is important for people whose homes have been affected by flooding to make sure their water is safe to drink, to know if food needs to be thrown out, and to clean all items touched by flood waters properly.”

The following information can help protect communities from illness and injury:

Basic Precautions to Prevent Disease

Minimize skin contact with sewer water and do not allow children to play in areas that have been contaminated by sewage overflows. Make sure to keep contaminated water and objects away from your mouth and wash your hands frequently.

- Wear rubber boots, gloves and a dust mask during removal and cleanup.
- Discard any contaminated objects that cannot be thoroughly washed or laundered.
- Wash contaminated surfaces and objects with warm, soapy water and then disinfect them with a bleach and water solution made of no more than one cup of 5.25 percent chlorine bleach per one gallon of water. For objects that would be damaged by bleach, use a home or laundry disinfectant.
- Open windows if possible to ventilate and dry the area. Fans can be used to help with drying.

Food and Water Safety

- Use only bottled or disinfected water for drinking, cooking, tooth brushing and bathing until you are sure the water supply is safe.
- Discard food exposed to contaminated waters. If refrigerators or freezers have taken in water, discard food stored there. If no water entered these appliances, but power was lost long enough for foods to thaw, discard all partially thawed foods unless prepared immediately.
- Discard milk, cheeses and other foods prone to spoilage. Completely thawed meats and vegetables should be discarded without question.
- Discard all bulging or leaking canned food and any food stored in jars. Undented, intact cans can be cleaned with a bleach solution before use.

Recycling Storm and Flood Waste:

- When disposing of flood debris, materials such as glass, metal debris and plastics must be separated.
- Household appliances, also known as “white goods,” can be recycled by taking them to a local scrap dealer, who will remove potentially harmful components.
- Tires must be disposed at a registered commercial processing facility. Units of local government may accumulate used and waste tires recovered via flood cleanup. It is important to drain all used tires of standing water and to store them in a manner that prevents the further accumulation of water.

Landfilling Flood Waste:

- The following items may be disposed in your local landfill: lumber, sandbags, plastic sheeting, shingles, insulation, food, carpet, furniture, and metal debris.
- **Check with the operator of your local landfill** to see if trees, branches, brush and other debris similar to landscape waste may be temporarily accepted there for disposal and, if so, for how long.
- Landscape compost facilities may also accept this type of material as long as it is not mixed with other types of storm debris.

Flood Water Sand Re-use and Disposal:

Floodwater sand may be contaminated with human and animal waste, oil and gasoline residue, and farm chemicals such as fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides.

- Always check with your local emergency management agency for disposal instructions. On occasion, sand or sandbags that did not contact floodwater can be reused without restrictions;
- Sand or sandbags that contacted floodwater should not be reused in ways that would involve direct human contact, such as in children's play areas or in residential gardening;
- Sand or sandbags that are visually contaminated, with oil or fecal matter, for example, should be disposed as waste at a landfill.

Learn more about the health and environmental impacts of floodwaters:

[Illinois Department of Public Health,](#)

IDPH [After the Flood](#) pamphlet

Contact your local health department

[Illinois Environmental Protection Agency](#)

[Illinois Emergency Management Agency](#)