The Need for National Leadership and Coordination
Responsibility for levee safety often is assigned in an uncoordinated and incomplete manner, distributed across all levels of government and housed in different agencies. This unaligned and diffused responsibility impedes the development of comprehensive safety programs and policies, impairs ongoing coordination, and prevents a sustained focus on the issue.

Although we do know that there are levees in all 50 states, the total number, location, and condition of many of the nation’s levees – and the population and property they protect – remain unknown. Preliminary estimates indicate there may be more than 100,000 miles of levees across the United States, with tens of millions of people living and working behind them.

Even though levees were originally constructed to protect people and property from flooding, they often inadvertently have increased flood risks by attracting greater development to the floodplain. In fact, levees initially built to protect agricultural fields now protect large urban areas, and the consequences of levee failure in these communities can be devastating. As a nation, we have failed to pay due attention to this essential piece of our infrastructure. Many levees are deteriorating after decades of neglect, and even levees that have been regularly maintained may be in need of substantial rehabilitation not having benefited from modern engineering.

At the federal level, several agencies have a role in levee safety, either through programs covering levees built or operated under their jurisdictions, or as part of a broader national program such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). These federal programs vary in scope, scale, and available resources. There is currently no single agency with the authority to effectively align existing federal programs to promote effective incentives and disincentives for increased levee safety.

The Need for National Levee Safety Standards
There is currently no national policy related to the safety of levees. Federal and state agencies have varying policies and criteria concerning many aspects of levee design, construction, operation, and maintenance, but there are no national policies, standards, or best practices that are comprehensive to the issues of levee safety that can be adopted broadly by governments at all levels.
Consequently, the level of protection and robustness of design and construction vary considerably across the country, helping to create a wide-ranging profile of risk exposure, risk understanding, risk levels, and public safety.

In addition, the lack of national policies or clear roles and responsibilities creates a scenario where individuals, engineers providing levee services, levee owners/operators, and even governments do not know where to turn for the most useful information and up-to-date guidance regarding levees and public safety.

**The Need for Clear and Consistent Communication**

Many government officials and the general public have only a limited understanding of levees and the risks associated with them. Clear and consistent communication on issues related to levee safety is an important role for the National Levee Safety Commission, including coordinating key messages with other federal agencies and sharing those messages with states, levee owners and operators, communities, and residents living and working behind levees.

**The Need for a National Levee Safety Commission**

The National Committee on Levee Safety (NCLS) recommends that Congress establish the National Levee Safety Program, led by an independent National Levee Safety Commission, to effectively address levee safety across the country (Recommendation 1). The National Committee on Levee Safety (NCLS) determined the following characteristics of a National Levee Safety Commission to be essential:

- Independence to address levee safety holistically, unconstrained by the momentum and priorities of existing programs, with the ability to make politically challenging decisions when necessary.

- Leadership for significant horizontal integration of effort across federal agencies and alignment of their programs, with vertical integration to achieve balanced participation at all levels of government.

- Organizational capabilities spanning regulatory policy development, program implementation, oversight and grants management; and significant experience in the relevant technical, public communication, and environmental areas.

The NCLS believes an independent federal agency with strong guidance by state, tribal, and local governments and the private sector is the ideal model for the National Levee Safety Commission. To be effective in aligning federal agencies and working with states and local governments will require a level of independence from any one agency.

The NCLS envisions full-time appointed Commissioners that would provide leadership for the National Levee Safety Program (NLSP), while an Administrator would oversee the day-to-day management of the Commission supported by staff, other federal agency employees on detail to the Commission, and four standing advisory committees.
To ensure the breadth and depth of expertise and leadership, the NCLS recommends that appointed commissioners represent state, local, regional, and tribal governments, as well as the private sector, and that they have experience in the areas of engineering, public communications, program development and oversight, and environment and public safety collaboration.

**Responsibilities of the National Levee Safety Commission**

The Commission should be charged with understanding and communicating risks associated with levees, developing national safety standards, facilitating dialogue and research on important levee related topics, and providing technical materials and assistance to all levels of government – in short, overseeing all aspects of the National Levee Safety Program.

Specifically, the NCLS envisions a Commission with program responsibilities to:

- Expand and maintain the National Levee Database (NCLS Recommendation 2).
- Adopt a Levee Hazard Potential Classification System (NCLS Recommendation 3).
- Develop Tolerable Risk Guidelines (NCLS Recommendation 5).
- Address growing concerns regarding liability for damages resulting from levee failures (NCLS Recommendation 8).
- Lead the public involvement and education/awareness campaign to understand risk and change behavior in leveed areas (NCLS Recommendation 9).
- Provide technical materials, assistance, and training to states, tribes, communities, and levee owners/operators (NCLS Recommendations 10 and 11).
- Develop and implement measures and practices to more closely harmonize levee safety activities with environmental protection requirements and principles (NCLS Recommendation 12).
- Conduct research and development to support efficient and more cost-effective levee safety technologies and practices (NCLS Recommendation 13).
- Design and engage state levee safety programs (NCLS Recommendation 14).
- Coordinate federal agency activities and programs.

The NCLS has adopted the vision of “an informed public and reliable levee systems working as part of an integrated approach to protect people and property from floods.” Strong national leadership is essential to achieving that vision. An independent National Levee Safety Commission would oversee and unite the elements of an effective and comprehensive National Levee Safety Program: national leadership for comprehensive and consistent approaches; aligned federal programs and actions; and strong levee safety programs in all states.