Good Morning/Afternoon. Thank you for inviting me to be a panelist and I hope to be able to share some of the practices that Santa Rosa County has used over the years to educate our citizens relative to preparedness and mitigation of flooding.

Santa Rosa County is a participant in the Community Rating System and has been for many years. We are currently a Class 5 which affords our citizens a 25 percent discount on their flood insurance premiums. This amounts to over 1 million dollars annually in flood premium savings.

If your jurisdiction is not a participant, I urge you to reconsider and take part in this money saving program. Most of the reasons given for not participating are ...it takes too much time, we would not benefit from the program, and we do not have enough staff...well I am just one person and I have found that it really does not take that much time and most of the requirements are already being done on a daily basis by either current staff or other departments. If you require elevation certificates and have a flood ordinance, then you are already half way there. Please contact your state floodplain manager or CRS coordinator for more information.

Mitigation Grants are one of the ways that we show our citizens that we can and will help them in mitigating our flood prone structures and obtain CRS points. We have elevated numerous structures throughout our county with the assistance of federal grant monies. This house is just one example of a structure that was lifted. It was a slab on grade and is now elevated 6 feet above the previous elevation and is now relatively safe from flooding. This is just one example of the many structures that we have elevated and saved our citizens from the horror that is a flooded structure.

The most time consuming of all the required elements is outreach. I have found that it is also the most enjoyable aspect of the program. It allows you time to get out and actually have contact with your citizens at venues that encourage and promote education such as expos and meetings of homeowners associations. CERT Teams, churches, and schools are also great ways to get the messages out to your citizenry. Sometimes we have the opportunity to do something really big.

In 2014 we were notified by FEMA Headquarters that we had been selected to participate in the High Water Mark Initiative. This involves placing signs in prominent locations around the county. We would be the 1st jurisdiction in the State of Florida to be involved. The initiative included Santa Rosa County unincorporated areas and the Cities of Milton and Gulf Breeze.

We were lucky enough to have a Flood mitigation task force already. This task force developed a Flood Mitigation plan a couple of years earlier and continued to play a vital role in our Local Mitigation Strategy group. The LMS assigned the HWMI to the FMTF and we started having meetings with the federal, state and local partners to plan the event.

Most of our meetings were held at our Development Services office with the federal and state partners attending by phone. Vince Brown, Lynne Keating and Alix Shutello were our FEMA partners and Dr. Alesia Scott-Ford with HUD was our federal partner. We also had assistance from numerous other federal and state entities such as the National Weather Service in Mobile, Florida Department of Emergency Management and the Northwest Florida Water Management District just to name a few.
We polled the citizens of the county to get ideas on where to place the signs and it was determined that we needed 13 signs to cover the known and most well visited areas of our county and the cities. We also chose to focus on increasing the number of flood insurance policies in our county as our main goal.

Now all we needed was a sign! We sent out a call to the local high schools to see if any of them would be interested in taking on the challenge of designing the sign. We were fortunate that Gulf Breeze High School Academy of Multimedia Design & Technology answered the challenge. Their teacher Heather Renfroe, was a blessing and a bit of a jokester. We visited the high school in October of 2014 and explained to the students what we were looking for and that they had one month to complete and submit their designs. The students worked in two or three person teams and submitted 14 entries, from which the final design was selected. We contracted a local sign company to create the signs. The signs are on reflective metal, so even at night they can be seen.

Choosing a location for our Kick-off meeting that met the requirements of being a well traveled area was essential. Navarre Visitors Center, located at the foot of the Navarre Beach bridge, was determined to be an ideal location. We knew that the water level was high there during Hurricane Ivan in 2004 and the location is in a high traffic area. We wanted to try and get the kick-off event done before the first of the year, so December 9th was chosen. We also wanted to have the high school students attend; so 11:00 am fit our plans perfectly.

Getting the logistics right, announcing it to the media, making sure the sign was installed at the correct height and covered, inviting the local, state and federal guests, exhibitors and securing the location all took time and effort. But in the end it was all worth the time. We had a tremendous turnout. Our Chairman “Don” Salter was our master of ceremonies, with speakers from FEMA Headquarters, Region IV, and the National Weather Service Mobile.

The best part of this event was the unveiling of the sign and the presentation of the awards to the high school students that designed it. Their teacher and I were the only ones who knew exactly which team was the winner. We awarded plaques to Alexandra and Caleb for their effort. The expressions on the faces of the students, was worth the secrecy.

The sign was unveiled by the Board of County Commissioners, Chairman “Don” Salter and Commissioner Rob Williamson. I am short (only 5’4”) so having both of those gentlemen who are at least 6 feet tall look up to see the sign, makes a rather impressive statement about the height of the water in this location.

There are other places within the County that the height of the water is much greater. One place is in our Floridatown area. The water got high enough to take out the I-10 bridge crossing Escambia River. The sign at that location is extremely high.

In closing; we found that this outreach, while taking a bit of effort, was successful since the signs have and continue to generate a lot of interest in the community and produced an increase in the number of flood insurance policies that were purchased by citizens. Outreach of any kind to your citizens is money and time well worth the investment. Thank you for your attention.