

**COUNTY OF**



**ALLEGHENY**

**RICH FITZGERALD**  
COUNTY EXECUTIVE

**Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee  
Hearing on Flooding, Landslides and Senate Bill 1131  
Testimony of County Executive Rich Fitzgerald**

Senator Vulakovich and members, thank you for inviting me to join you here today to talk about this important issue. As you are likely aware, the words “flooding” and “landslides” are being used far more often in this region this year than they have in the recent past. In fact, I am in the unenviable position of having declared four states of emergency already this year: February, June, July and September.

We all know that western Pennsylvania is hilly. Most of the time, we revel in it. Particularly during the rainy months, landslides become a way of life and we adjust. This year, however, that has not been the case as landslides have closed down main arteries into our communities, resulted in the loss of homes and buildings, forced evacuations and relocation, and have placed significant stressors on this county and its municipalities as we try to respond to the needs caused by this activity.

From February through April, the county received the highest level of precipitation on record. National Weather Services (NWS) Pittsburgh records show 9.68” of precipitation from February 15 to April 4 at the Pittsburgh International Airport, and 8.68” of precipitation at the Allegheny County Airport. During that time, our region saw flood damage, river ice jams, continuous large-scale landslides, utility damages, major and frequent interruptions to transportation systems, and – in the most severe cases – complete destruction of individual homes and properties.

Neither county governments or local governments have the resources to address such significant impacts on our region. While we all plan for road and hillside stabilization projects in our annual budget based solely on our topography, the damages this year have far exceeded anything we could have imagined. The number for Allegheny County alone through April exceeded \$12.2 million. That figure has only grown since then as this region has experienced many more weather events resulting in emergency declarations.

For individuals living here, the picture is even more dire. In April, over 55 residences had been impacted by flooding and landslides, with dozens more in danger of being impacted. Landslides numbered in the 70s, and more than 25 homes had 40% or greater uninsured loss. In Pennsylvania, you can get insurance for landslides caused by mining practices and mudslides, but when it comes to other types of landslides, the damages are typically not covered by insurance. Landslide damage caused by flooding is not covered by the National Flood Insurance Program.

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For us, it has been the extraordinary amount of rain this year that, we believe, has caused much of the landslide activity, but there are other factors that can also contribute to landslides. From the county perspective, we want to understand as much as we can about what causes them so that we can do everything within our power to prevent them.

In June, I convened the Allegheny County Landslide and Flooding Task Force co-chaired by Chief of Emergency Services Matt Brown and Public Works Director Steve Shanley. Our goal is to share information between agencies and organizations which have a role in addressing this issue, to determine if there are ways to help officials be aware of potential slides, and to share information and lessons learned widely to further inform and protect our community.

Before I ask Chief Brown and Director Shanley to share with you where we are with this initiative, I do want to address legislative efforts on this topic as well.

Senator Costa's legislation, Senate Bill 1131, can be an important step for property owners to protect themselves. The bill, before your committee, will establish the Landslide Insurance and Assistance Program within the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA). In addition to providing insurance coverage available for landslide loss, the program would also be focused on providing tools and incentives for landslide loss reduction. Particularly for the dozens and dozens of homeowners who are experiencing this now, this legislation is a great first step and much needed.

I'd also respectfully ask that the legislature also consider looking again at legislation proposed in 2009 which would have created the Geologically Hazardous Areas Act. The legislation came about as a result of work done by a task force following a massive landslide in 2006 which occurred at a commercial development site in Kilbuck Township. Between 500,000 and 600,000 cubic yards of earth and scone came down the hillside, across the four-lane highway, onto three adjacent railway tracks, stopping just short of the Ohio River. The slide impacted approximately 22,000 vehicles traveling the highway daily, 100 trains each day commercial rail link, impacting neighboring communities with increased traffic congestion and traffic hazards. Remediation costs were reported at 2 million and another 75,000 in monitoring costs per month.

The legislation crafted by the Task Force can help address landslide prevention and provide statutory guidance for other types of hazards like sinkholes. It also proposed statewide review and oversight of developments in geographically hazardous areas, providing additional expertise and guidance to communities that may not have those resources available to them. While the legislation was introduced in 2009, it did not receive legislative approval and does not appear to have been reintroduced. I know that the Chairman was a member of that Task Force and has firsthand knowledge of the issues faced in that community. While there are different factors at play, the solution proposed would be helpful to us here as well.

Again, thank you for the invitation to join you today. I'm happy to answer any questions that you may have following the conclusion of the testimony being presented by the county.