Responses to Climate Change Depend on Our Institutions: The Case of U.S. Flood Control

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Social scientists can:

• investigate incentives
• identify institutional barriers to action,
• and identify approaches that work
Under climate change scenarios, infrastructure limits our physical options:

• project designs assume water sources will be replenished

• U.S. flood control and storm-water systems
  – send fresh water quickly to the sea
  – create perverse incentives to build in floodplains
Souris River, Minot, North Dakota
The modern state:

organizes coercive power to control territory
Seeking development aid in a federal system

Local: organizing base is landowner-run levee districts
State: activists gain levee laws and aid
Regional: organize voting blocs in Congress
National: two regional campaigns merge to promote nation-wide aid
Levees--Red Lake River, Minnesota
Federalism and flood control

- federal government owns the "river"
- 50 state governments own the riverbed
- federal government builds critical levees
- states create levee district laws and facilitate the spending of federal aid
- state governments or local levee districts maintain the levees
- “nonfederal interests” share costs
- contractors do the work
Institutional constraints in U.S. water systems

- control over infrastructure is often decentralized
- strong political support for uncoordinated or even competing systems
- no powerful constituencies for comprehensive resource planning
- project beneficiaries are adept at side-stepping environmental reforms
- however, instances of creative federalism arise