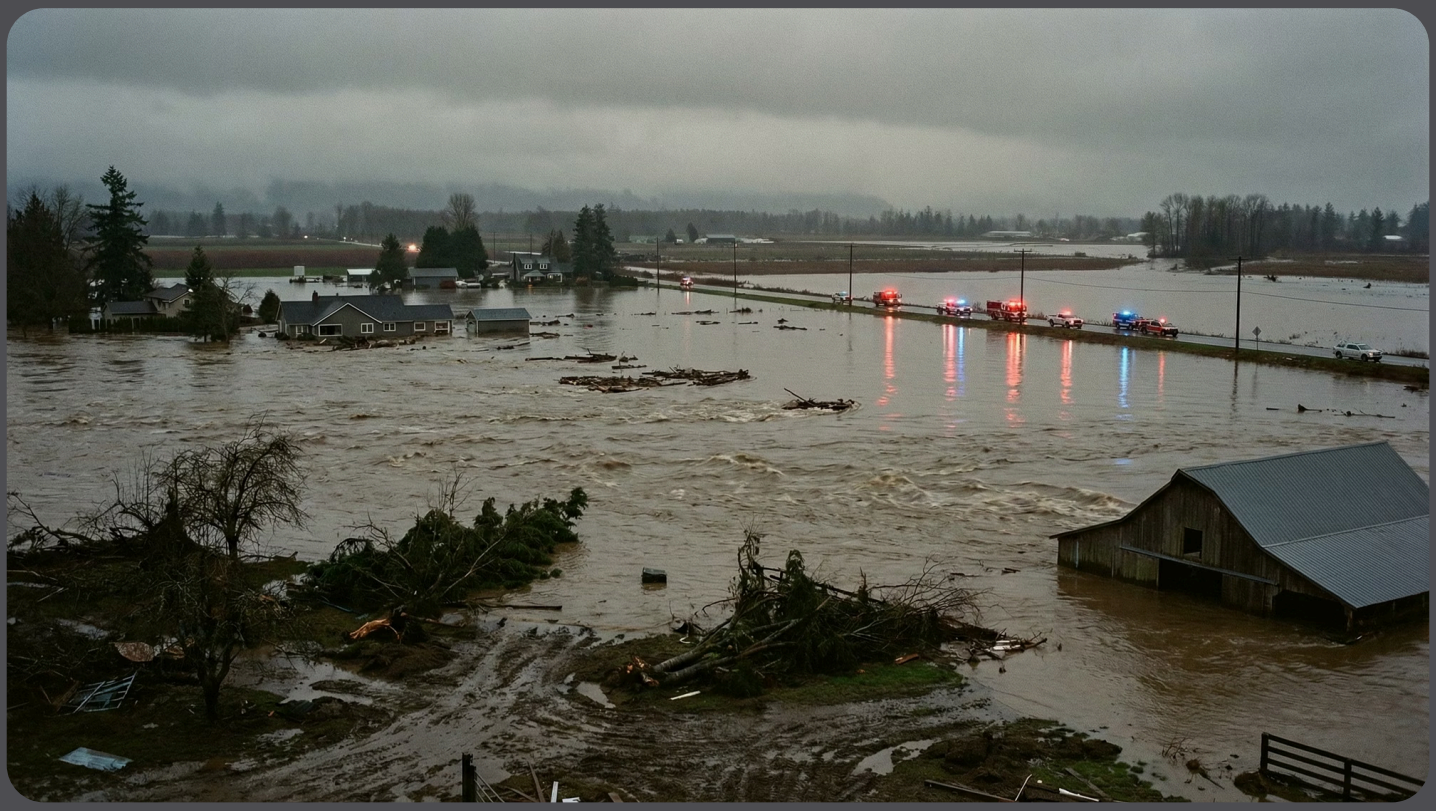
EAP: How a Mutual Aid Group Moves Through a Flood Day



When this was written, Northwest Washington was underwater. The Skagit River just broke records. Families evacuated from their homes. People lost everything they'd worked for. If you're reading this from the affected areas, I see you.

This is scary. This is real. I'm not here to downplay any of it.

What I am here to do is show you what happened in my corner of this mess. Because when I got that call yesterday that our mutual aid home base was flooding, something became crystal clear.

Emergency response is stretched to breaking right now. They're doing what they can, but there aren't enough hands, enough trucks, enough hours in the day.

So while we wait for help to arrive, we've got each other. Your neighbors. Your friends. The people you've been building relationships with. They're who shows up first when things go sideways.

Here's the reality: **In the critical first hours, the people closest to you move fastest.**

Early Morning Trigger

01

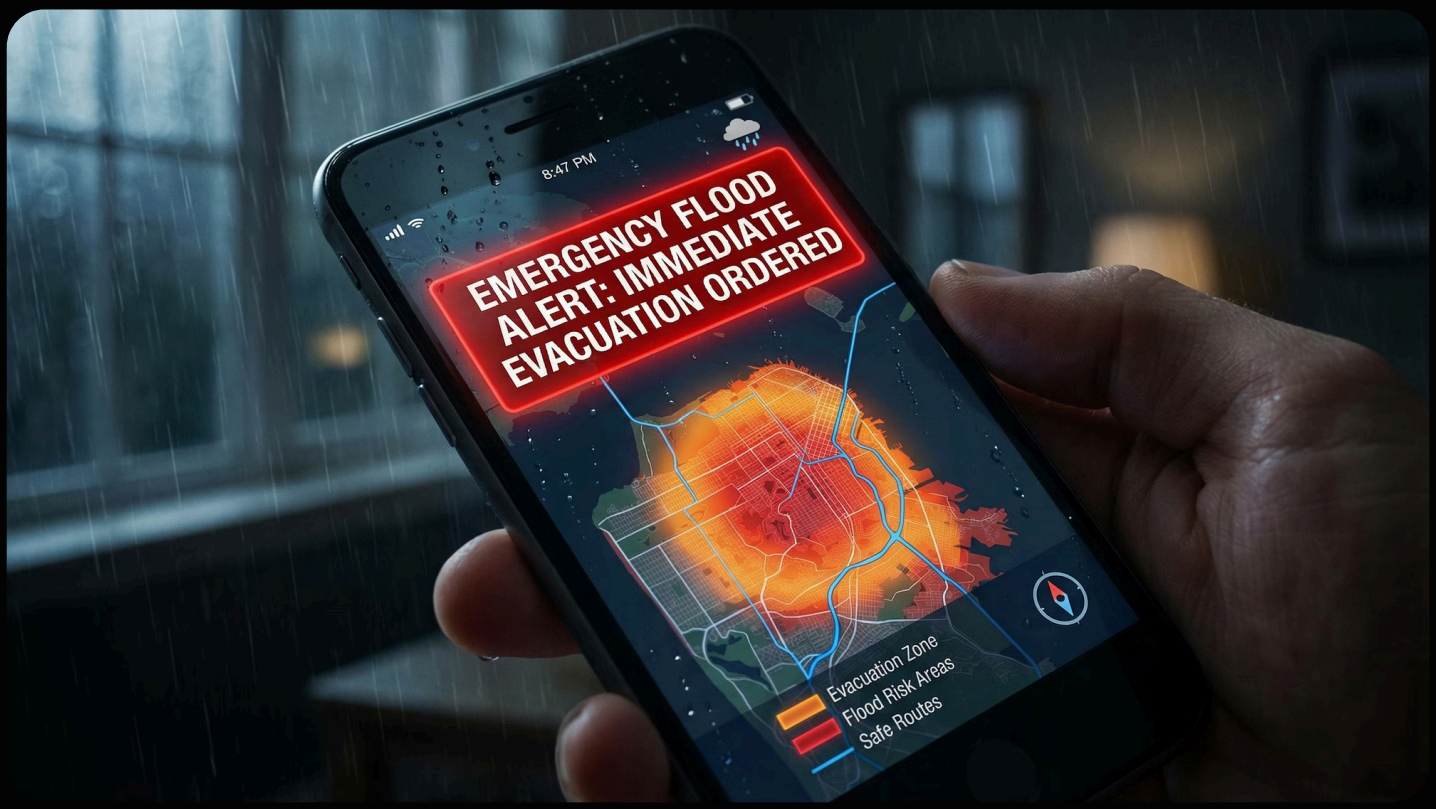
Major flood alert or Level 2–3 evacuation notice hits phones

02

Coordinator posts a single activation message in the group

03

Info team pins current river level, forecast, and official evac links



Check 1: Self

You sit up. Before grabbing the phone again you do a 60-second internal inventory.

Pause 60 seconds to assess:

- Am I safe where I am sitting
- Can I think clearly or am I spiraling

Grab essentials and stage them at the exit:

- ID, meds, glasses, wallet, keys, phone, charger, go-bag

Put on weather-appropriate clothing and shoes. You drink water, get dressed for cold wet weather, and move your go-bag to the front door. Only then do you open the group chat.

Check 2: Family and Household

Next priority is your immediate people.

- Wake everyone in the house.
- Confirm who is physically in the building and who is already elsewhere for work or school.
- One person pulls up the city evac map. Another starts putting pets in carriers.

If you are inside the official evacuation zone, the decision tree is simple. You leave. You do not stay to "wait and see" while the river climbs another five feet.

Decide

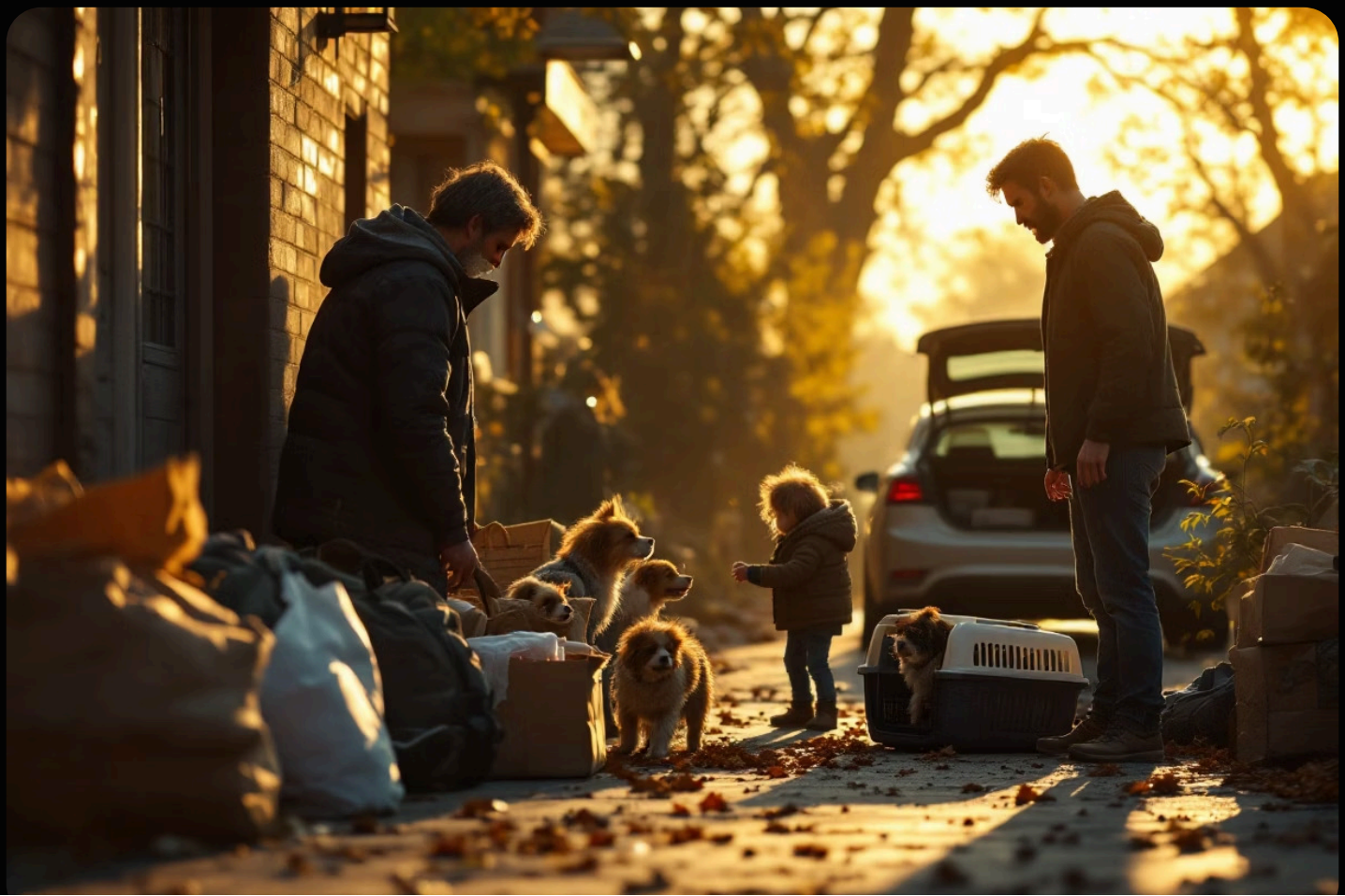
If in an evacuation zone. Leave. If outside zone but at risk. Prepare to leave quickly.

Actions if evacuating

Wake everyone. Secure pets in carriers. Move vehicles to high ground. Take one route that avoids low roads and known closure spots.

Actions if staying

Move valuables and electronics to upper floors. Shut off utilities if water is likely to enter.



Check 3: Mutual Aid Core

On the way to the car you send one short standard message into the group channel:

> "I am safe. Household is [evacuating / sheltering in place]. We are at [address or cross streets]. Battery at X percent. Vehicle: [yes / no]."

You scan the channel. People are checking in. The info team has already posted the latest river forecast and road closures, with timestamps and links to NWS, Skagit County and the city alerts. No screenshots without a source.

Send one standard check-in line to the group:

"I am safe. Household is [evacuating / staying high]. Location [cross streets]. Battery X%. Vehicle [yes / no]. Can help with [rides / sandbags / check-ins] or need [ride / housing / supplies]."

Coordinator and info team:

- Log all check-ins in a simple list or map.
- Flag anyone in an evacuation zone without transport.

Logistics team:

- Match drivers with people needing rides.
- Match high-ground hosts with evacuees.
- Assign sandbag or prep tasks to people in safe spots.

Check 4: Neighbors

Only after you know your household and core group are covered do you work outward. The group has pre-identified people with high needs in likely flood paths. Seniors on oxygen. Families with no car on Sterling Rd. Farmworkers living in RVs near Cockreham Island.

Start with pre-identified high-risk neighbors:

- Older adults, disabled people, families without cars, non-English speakers, RVs or trailers in low spots.

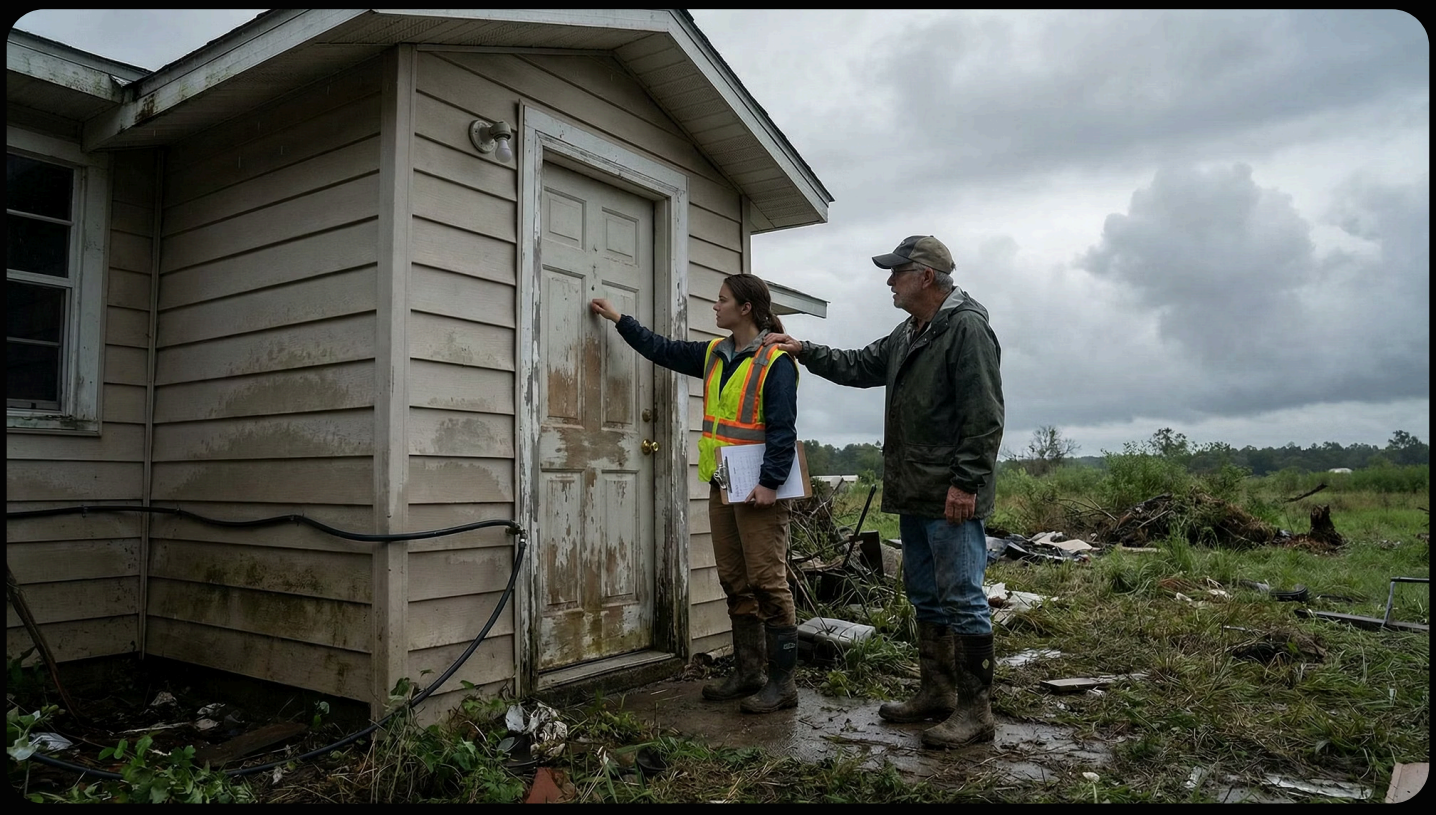
Use a short script at the door or by phone:

- "There is a flood warning for this area."
- "Do you already have a plan and a ride if you need to leave"
- "We have [seat count] going to [safe area] now / soon. Do you want that option"

Add each neighbor to one of three lists:

1. Ready with own plan.
2. Needs follow-up call later.
3. Needs immediate ride or support now.

Report results back to the group channel so logistics can act.



Emergency Action Plan: Floods in Northwest Washington, Skagit-focused

Use this as a template you can adapt for Skagit, Whatcom, and neighboring counties.

3.1 Scope and assumptions

Hazards

River flooding from Skagit, Samish, Nooksack and tributaries, plus surface runoff, levee and dike issues, slides blocking roads.

Geography

Skagit River basin from Concrete through Sedro-Woolley, Burlington, Mount Vernon, plus lowlands toward Samish Bay.

Timeframe

Multi-day atmospheric river events with one or more crests, like December 2025.

The core goal is to protect life and reduce avoidable damage through early action and coordinated help.

3.2 Triggers for activating the plan

You want simple, numeric triggers + official alerts.

Gauge-based triggers, Skagit at Mount Vernon

Heads up (monitoring)

- NWS posts Flood Watch for Skagit County.
- Forecast crest at Mount Vernon above 28 ft (minor flooding).

Activation Levels

Partial activation

Actual stage rises above 30 ft (moderate flooding) or forecast crest above 32 ft (major flood stage).

County press releases mention "major flooding," "historic flooding" or "near record levels".

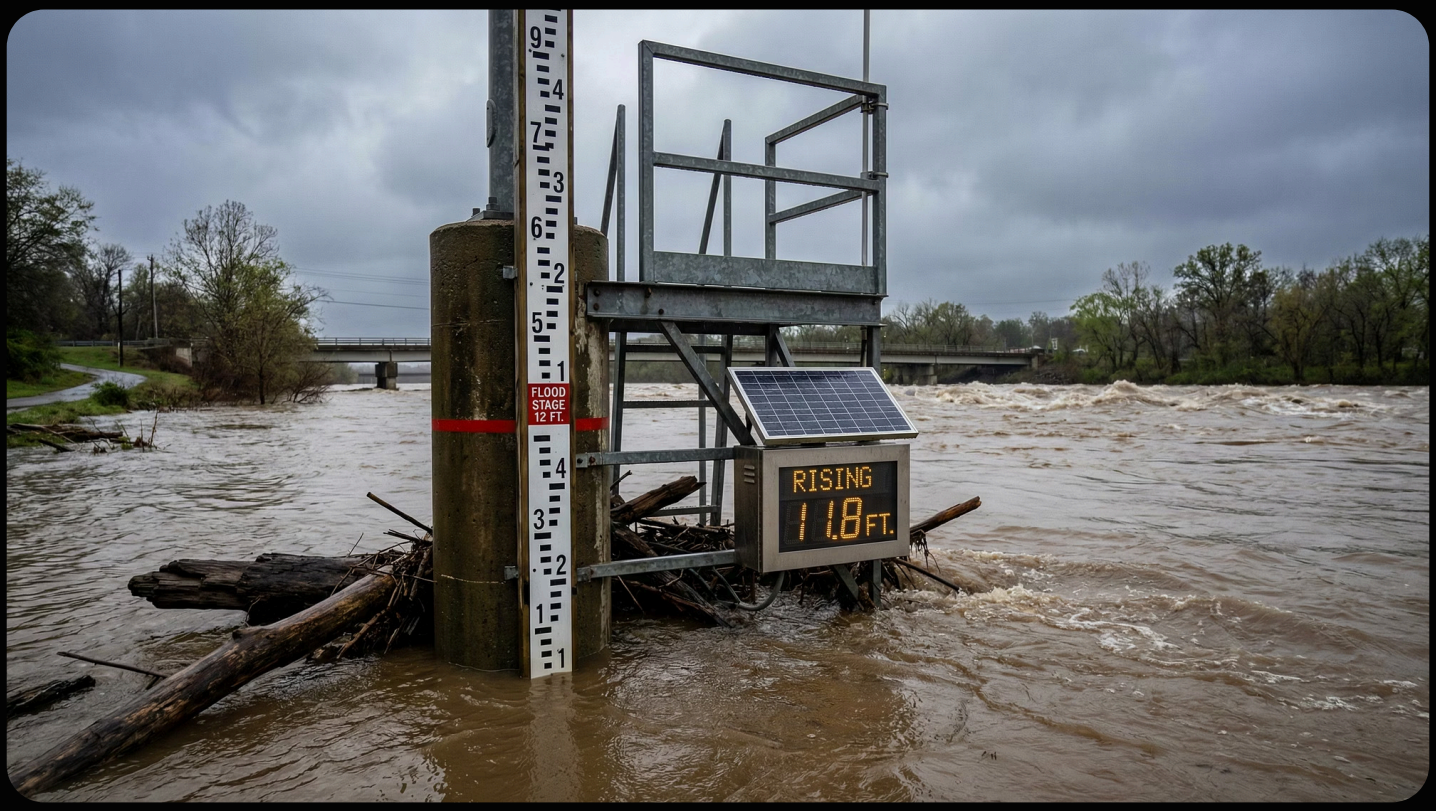
Full activation

Forecast crest at Mount Vernon approaching 36 ft or higher. NWS calls this "severe near record flooding" with widespread road and levee impacts.

Any Level 2 or Level 3 evacuation notice for your zone, or for people you support.

Use the Skagit County river levels page and the NWS river hydrograph as your technical references.

3.3 Roles and communication



Roles in the Mutual Aid Group

Keep it minimal so people remember it.

Coordinator

Decides when the group moves from monitoring to activation based on triggers.

Info team

Watches NWS, Skagit County, WSDOT and city alerts, posts concise updates with links, time and gauge values.

Logistics team

Rides, temporary housing, sandbag crews, supply runs.

Check-in team

Runs the self → household → group → neighbors ladder and tracks who has been reached.

Channels

- One primary digital channel for real-time chat.
- One backup phone tree for when power or data is limited.
- Shared document or map where you log, with timestamps: Evacuation zones. Confirmed road closures. Confirmed safe routes.

Phase 1: Preparing for a Flood

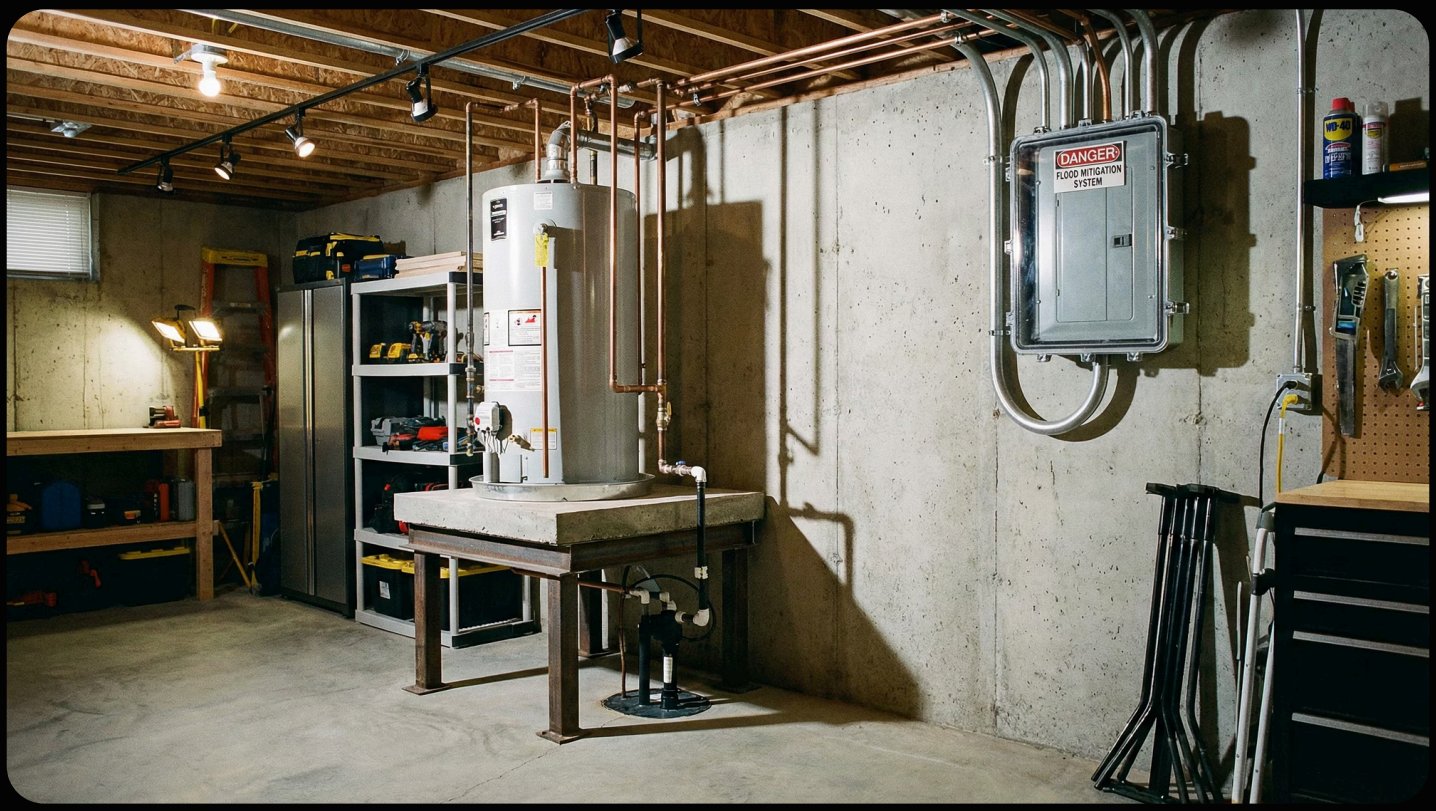
Combine your earlier Phase-1 material with local context.

A. Risk and home fortification

Confirm if your home or workplace is inside a mapped floodplain. City floodplain management and county planning can tell you this.

If you are at repeat risk:

- Elevate furnace, water heater, electrical panel above past high-water marks.
- Install backflow or check valves on sewer lines to cut down on sewage coming up through drains.
- Seal basement walls with waterproofing compounds; consider small permanent berms or low walls around entry points.



Resources and Readiness

B. Resources and readiness

Water

When heavy rain and flood alerts ramp up, fill bathtubs, sinks and containers so you are not dependent on tap water that might get contaminated.

Vehicle

Keep fuel above half a tank during the wet season. Park where you can get out even if one access road goes underwater.

Camping or vehicle living

Never camp or park in dry channels, low riverbars, or obvious drainage swales. A storm far upstream can turn them into rivers while you sleep.

C. Mutual aid group tasks before season

Map the basin. Mark:

- Likely floodplains along Skagit, Samish, Nooksack, tributaries.
- Residential clusters near chronically closing roads like Sterling Rd, Sam Bell Rd, Lyman-Hamilton Hwy, and South Skagit Highway.

Identify:

- Who has high-ground, dry storage, and guest space.
- Who has high-clearance vehicles or boats suited for shallow flooded roads, not fast rivers.
- Who is medically fragile, car-free, or language-isolated.

Phase 2: During a Flood

Use your existing "surviving during a flood" content as the backbone.

Information

Keep one radio, phone, or weather app tuned to NWS and local alerts. Treat Flood Warnings, evacuation notices, and bridge closure forecasts as action prompts, not background noise.

Movement rules

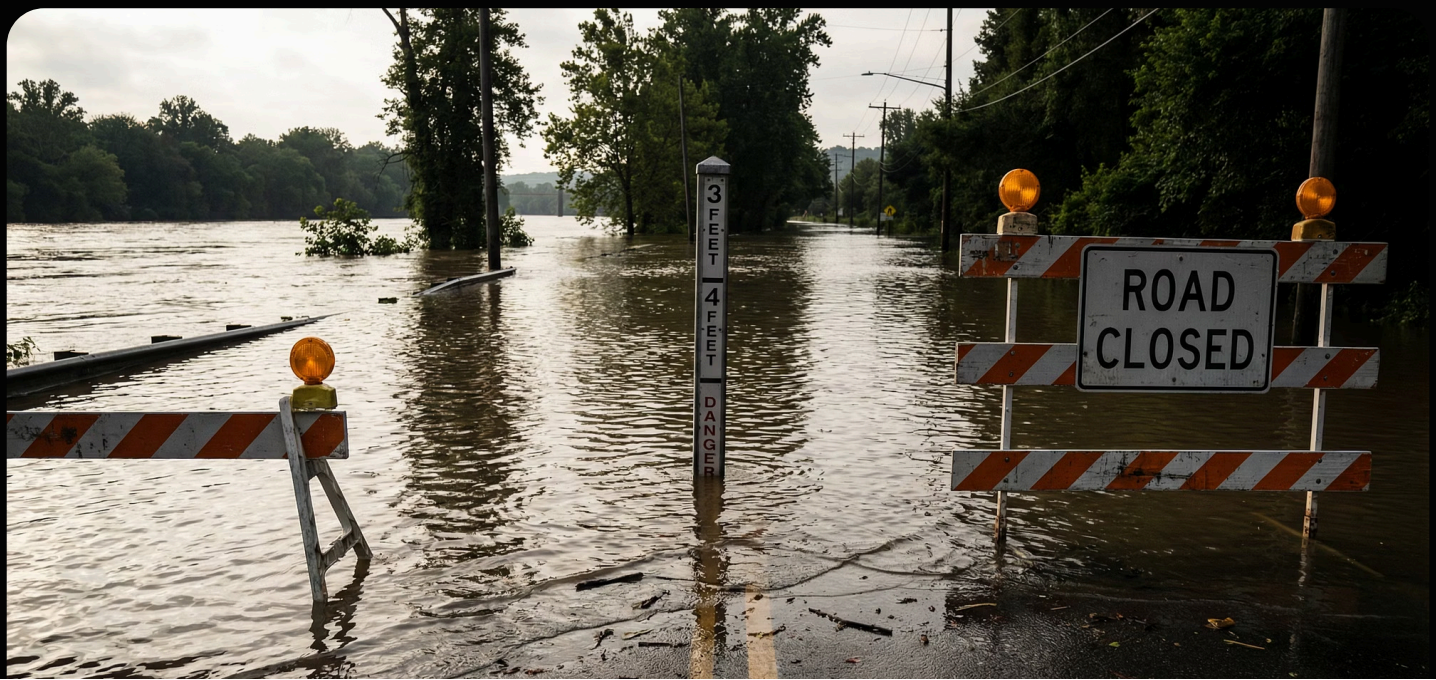
Walking:

Avoid moving water entirely if you can. Six inches of fast water can knock you down. If you must walk through water, choose the stillest possible area. Use a stick to probe the ground.

Driving:

Around 6 inches of water can reach the undercarriage of a car and lead to stalling. Around 1 foot can float many small vehicles. Around 2 feet of moving water can carry away SUVs and trucks.

Never drive around barricades or into water "to see how deep it is". If you stall in rising water, get out and walk to higher ground if it is safe to do that.



Utilities and Structure Safety

Utilities and structure

- If water is likely to enter, shut off power at the main breaker, especially for older homes where outlets are low.
- Do not touch electrical equipment while wet or standing in water.

Self → family → group → neighbors ladder in Phase 2

01

Self

Secure clothing, shoes, meds, ID, communication devices, and cash. Take three slow breaths before making any decision involving water or roads.

02

Family / household

Establish the plan: shelter in place on upper floor or evacuate to a known high-ground location. If evacuating, choose routes that avoid known low roads and bridges that are near their closure thresholds. For Mount Vernon, remember the Division Street Bridge closes at 36 feet.

Group and Neighbor Response

01

Mutual aid group

Send your standard check-in line. If you are safe and mobile, signal availability for rides, supply runs, or sandbag crews.

02

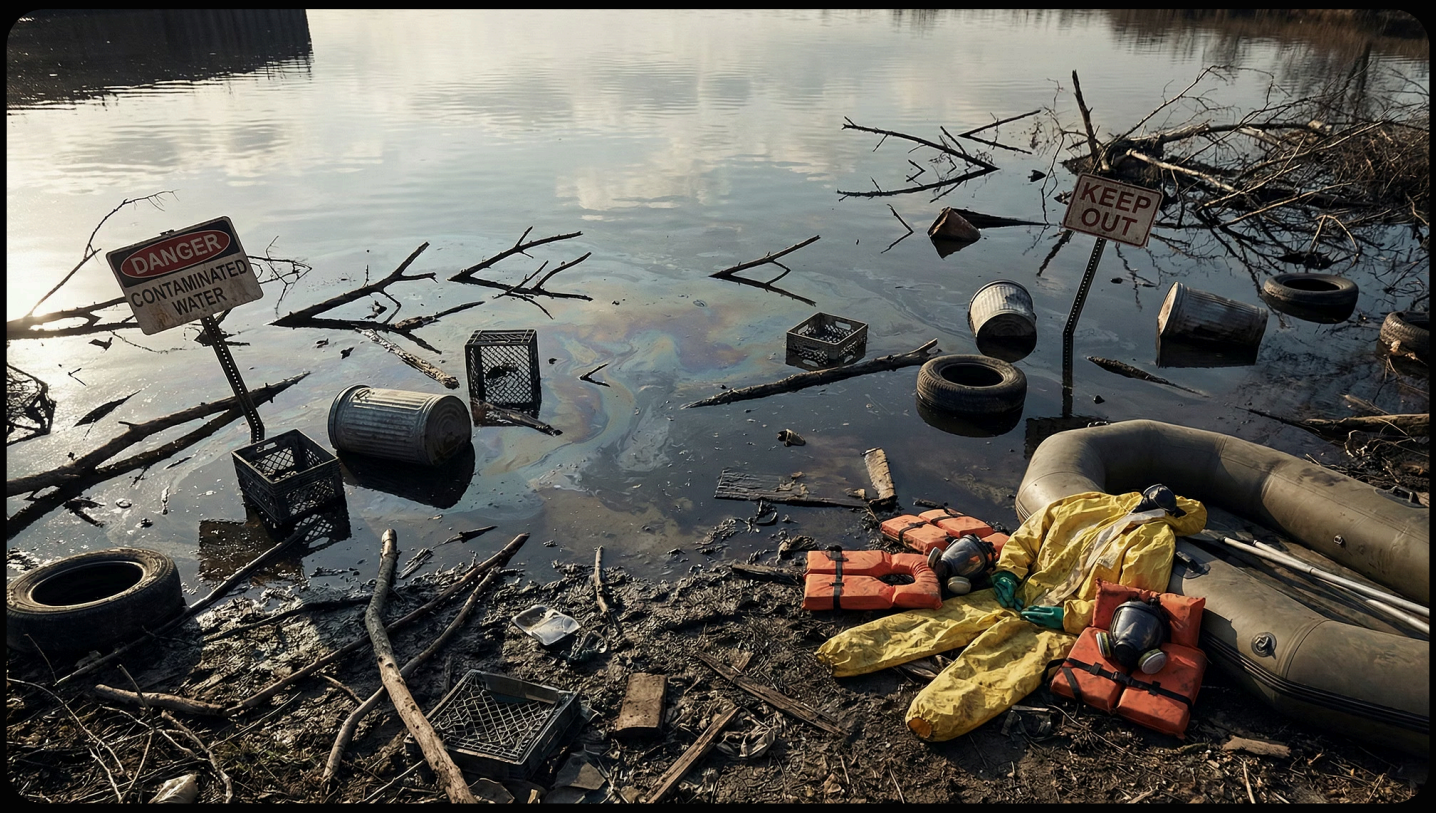
Neighbors

Focus first on people you previously identified as high-risk. Use a short script. Offer concrete options: "We are leaving now in a truck with two open seats going to [location]. Do you want to come with us"

3.6 Phase 3. After a flood

Health and contamination:

- Assume floodwater is contaminated with sewage, fuel and chemicals. Skin contact is bad. Ingestion is worse.
- Treat downed power lines and standing water near them as live.
- Discard any food and water that touched floodwater unless it is in factory-sealed metal cans you can clean thoroughly.



After the Flood: Re-entry and Cleanup

Home re-entry:

- Wait for authorities to lift evacuations. Confirm roads and bridges on official sites.
- Check for structural damage before re-entering. Watch for sagging floors, cracked foundations, and shifted stairs.
- Service septic systems and wells quickly if they flooded.

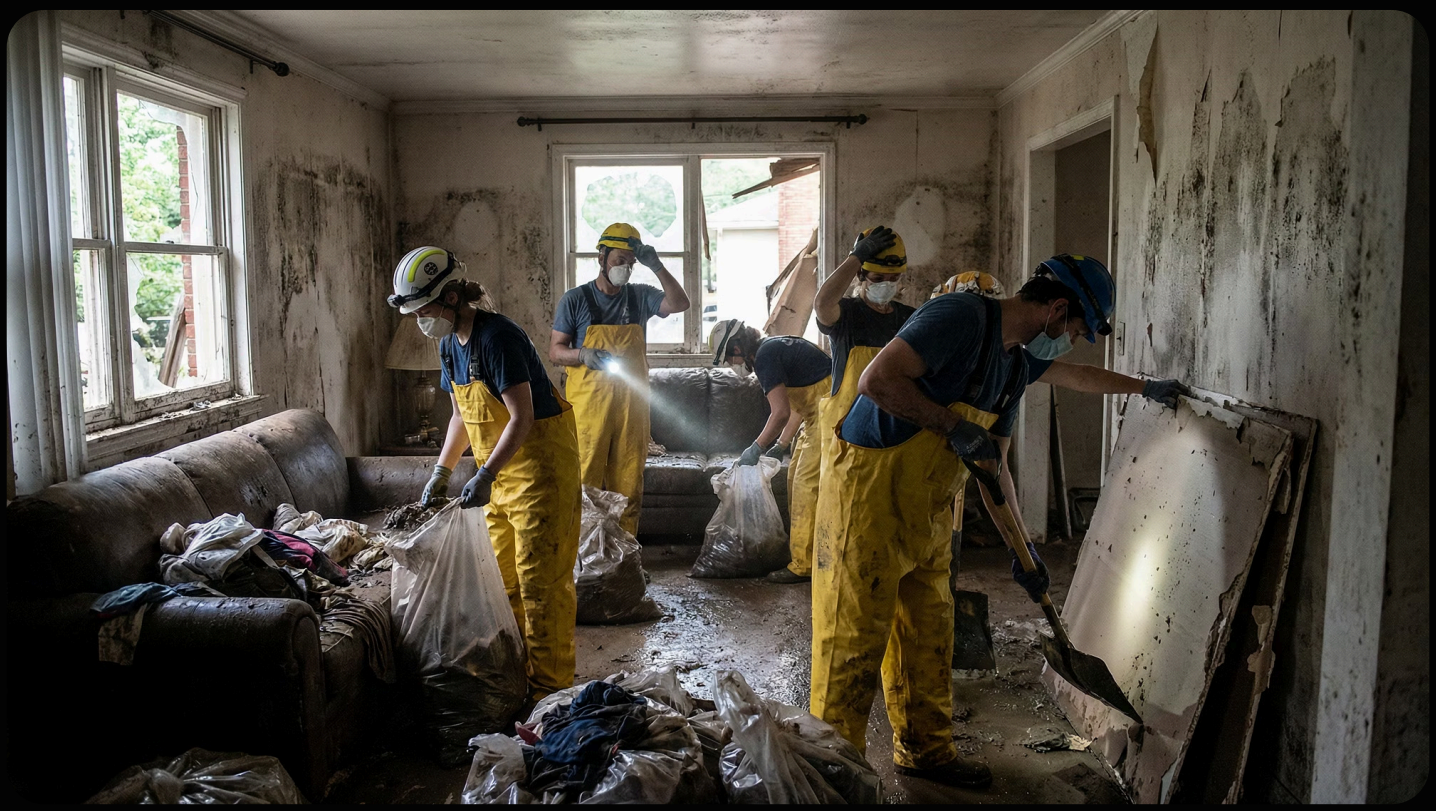
Cleanup:

- Pull wet drywall, insulation and carpets as soon as practical.
- Use gloves, boots and masks.
- Ventilate aggressively once outside air is drier than indoors.

Community and mutual aid:

Run an intake list: who needs housing, who needs cleanup help, who needs rides to work or medical care, who needs help with FEMA or insurance paperwork.

Log volunteer hours and donated materials. These records matter later for reimbursement and grants.



Sandbag Operations Appendix

Use this as a plug-in "field manual" for your group.

4.1 What a sandbag is and what it is not

A sandbag is a woven polypropylene or burlap bag filled with sand or fine gravel.

Principle: weight + density = resistance to water pressure.

A sandbag wall does not create a perfect seal. It slows, redirects and reshapes water. Think "force shaping," not "watertight dam."

Best use cases:

- Redirecting flowing water around buildings.
- Protecting doors, garages and low vents.
- Reinforcing low spots in existing berms or levees.
- Creating temporary channels for surface runoff.

Poor use cases:

- Deep standing water.
- Groundwater seepage through slabs.
- Long-term or large-river protection on its own.

How to Fill and Place Sandbags

4.2 How to fill a sandbag

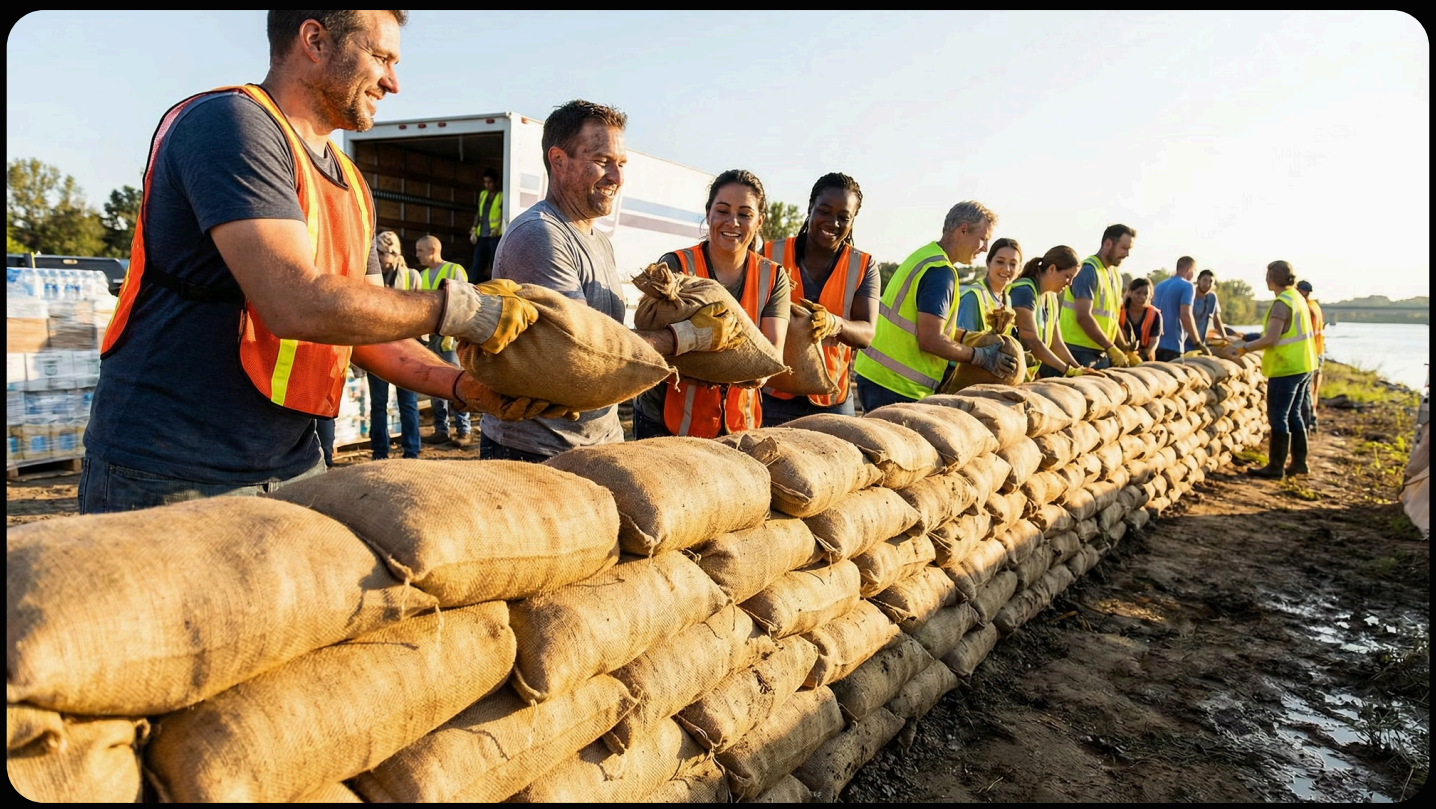
1. **Fill half to two-thirds full**
2. **Use sand or small gravel. No big rocks, trash or sharp debris**
3. **Leave space in the bag so it can squash and seal when placed**
4. **Tie loosely or not at all for bags that will be stacked in a wall**

Overfilled bags sit like rocks. They leave gaps and topple easily.

4.3 How to place sandbags

Goal: one continuous, sag-free barrier.

- Lay bags lengthwise in the direction of expected flow.
- Place the open end facing upstream, so water pushes it closed, not open.
- Flatten each bag by stepping on it so it spreads and seals.
- Stagger joints like bricks.
- Overlap and tuck the cloth to get rid of visible gaps.
- Where flow is stronger, turn some bags sideways in the second layer so they interlock.



Stacking and Making Sandbags Useful

4.4 How to stack a low wall

For a wall up to about 2 feet high:

- First layer: single row of flat bags.
- Second layer: centered over seams of the first layer.
- Each new layer steps back slightly, forming a low pyramid.

Never build a narrow vertical wall. It will blow out.

Rule of thumb: three bags wide for every one bag high as a base.

4.5 Making sandbags actually useful

Practical patterns that work:

Build curved or funnel-shaped barriers that guide water past a structure instead of hitting it head on. Straight walls tend to fail.

Anchor the first layer into the ground. Remove loose debris so bags sit on soil, pavement, or gravel, not on mud and vegetation.

Use plastic sheeting on the "dry side" of the wall if you need extra protection, with sandbags holding the plastic down.

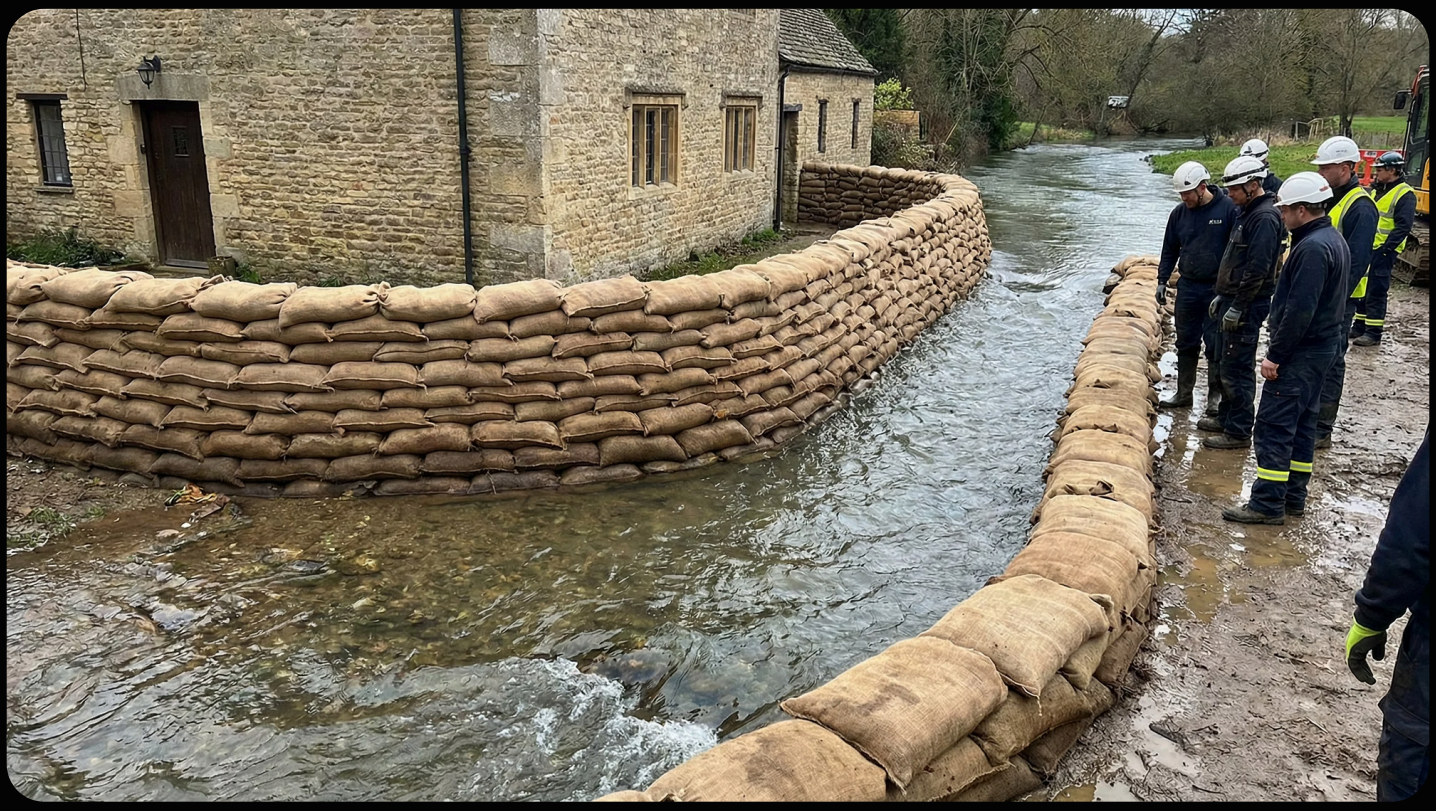
Extend barriers well beyond the obvious threat zone. Water looks for the lowest edge and will go around your stack.

Inspection and Core Principle

Inspection and adjustments:

- Expect leaks. Watch for trickles inside the protected area. Plug them by adding bags and adjusting overlaps before they widen.
- Reinforce corners and direction changes with extra bags.
- Keep at least one drain path available downslope and away from buildings so you do not create a bathtub that backs water into another home.

> ### The principle to repeat when you teach this:
>
> **Sandbags work when you give water an easier path than the one you are blocking. They fail when you try to stop water completely.**
>
> That is true at a front door. It is also true at a levee.



Quick Checklist Version

You can compress this into a one-pager.

Before

- Know your flood zone, gauge, and main evacuation routes.
- Pre-map high-risk people and resources in your mutual aid group.
- Elevate utilities and store key items up high.
- Maintain go-bags and partial water storage.

When alerts escalate

- Watch Skagit gauge and NWS alerts.
- When forecast crest is above 32 ft or evacuation notices hit your area, activate the group.
- Self check. Household check. Group check. Neighbor check. In that order.

During

- Stay off moving water. Do not drive through it.
- Use sandbags to redirect flow early rather than saving a structure that is already surrounded.
- Move vehicles, people and key gear to high ground before roads go under.

After

- Treat all floodwater as contaminated.
- Re-enter only after official all-clear and your own structural check.
- Support cleanup, housing and paperwork through your mutual aid network.
- Update your local maps with what actually flooded, what closed first, and what routes held.

Remember: In the critical first hours, it's the people closest to you who can move fastest.