January 24, 2023

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Democratic Leader, U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Speaker, U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Republican Leader, U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries
Democratic Leader, U.S. House of
Representatives Washington, DC 20515

Dear Leader Schumer, Leader McConnell, Speaker McCarthy, and Leader Jeffries:

As the 118th Congress begins, the Adaptation Working Group looks forward to working with you to ensure communities across the nation are more resilient to the threats of flooding, major disasters, and other natural hazards.

The undersigned organizations are members of the Adaptation Working Group, a coalition of national organizations that represent a broad array of stakeholders — local governments, utilities, disaster response and recovery professionals, conservationists, underserved populations, resilience policy specialists, and more — who believe that the federal government should prioritize and promote community resilience and adaptation to flooding.

We applaud the 117th Congress's bipartisan leadership in enhancing federal policy to tackle growing threats from flooding and extreme weather, which have caused tremendous human and financial harm in recent years — especially in California, Kentucky, and New York.

As you look to 2023 and beyond, for both implementing existing programs and enacting new policy, we encourage you to incorporate the following values to build a more flood-resilient nation.

Simplify programs to reduce barriers and expand access

Local governments are best positioned to invest federal dollars in ways that address local flood adaptation needs; however, the federal programs that provide these funds are notoriously complicated from start to finish. Additionally, high cost-share requirements and unpredictable funding levels cause many local governments, which are often under-staffed and under-resourced, to give up on obtaining federal support altogether. Local cost-share requirements — which are usually based on a project's total cost without taking into account population size, wealth, or tax base — greatly disadvantage most rural communities that apply for funding: In rural areas, adaptation and resilience projects are often larger and benefit fewer people than in cities and become too expensive for rural communities because of their smaller

tax bases.[1] To be more accessible for communities, federal programs should simplify requirements, lower cost-share requirements for low-capacity and at-risk communities, and establish consistent funding expectations.

Additionally, technical assistance programs can help local governments develop action plans, apply for project funding, and implement grants effectively. In some cases, local risk assessments by engineering firms are too expensive for local governments. Technical assistance programs, however, fund this cost, while also positioning local governments to successfully design the project at hand and build technical capacity for future projects.

Simplifying programs, lowering local cost share requirements, authorizing consistent funding, and providing local governments with technical assistance will expand access to programs for all communities while strengthening program outcomes.

Invest in our most at-risk communities

Natural hazards do not impact all populations equally. Flooding threatens vulnerable communities across a range of geographies and socioeconomic circumstances: rising seas displace Tribal Nations in the Pacific Northwest, worsening tropical storms devastate Black and Latino neighborhoods in the Southeast, and severe flash floods wipe out rural areas in Appalachia. A 2021 report[2] found that American Indian and Alaska Native people are 48% more likely to be currently living on land projected to be lost to sea level rise, and Latino and Hispanic people are 50% more likely to currently live in areas projected to experience the worst traffic delays in the nation because of flooded roads from sea level rise.

With targeted investments in communities, the federal government can empower local governments to advance adaptation and resilience solutions that best fit their unique needs. Additionally, the federal government should ensure investments and policy decisions are informed by intentional dialogue with affected communities so that programs are addressing concerns and not worsening problems due to a lack of knowledge and local experience.

By supporting the most at-risk communities with investments focused on addressing specific challenges, the federal government can ensure those on the front lines of flooding and sea level rise can adapt and thrive.

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[1] "Match requirements prevent rural and low-capacity communities from accessing climate resilience funding." *Headwaters Economics,* Jan 2023.
[2] EPA. 2021. Climate Change and Social Vulnerability in the United States: A Focus on Six Impacts. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, EPA 430-R-21-003.

Empower communities to implement the most beneficial adaptation solutions to fit their unique needs

Local communities are positioned to choose adaptation solutions that best meet their needs, which often includes protecting against natural hazards through nature itself. Coastal marshes and wetlands can reduce wave energy from storm surge by over 50% and provide coastal storm protection valued at $23.2 billion every year in the U.S.[3] In urban settings, flooding solutions can improve water quality by filtering runoff and reduce the burden on stormwater systems by holding water during extreme storms, all while lowering the costs of maintaining water utilities. Other co-benefits from nature-based solutions include raising neighboring property values and providing recreational access.

The federal government should work with the private sector to educate local governments about the costs and comprehensive benefits (flood protection, recreation, ecological restoration, etc.) of all adaptation solutions and allow local communities to implement the most beneficial adaptation solutions to manage local resources, improve neighborhoods, and reduce losses from natural hazards.

Use updated data to plan for the future

Federal data sources, such as FEMA flood maps and Atlas 14 rainfall data, are often incomplete or outdated. They also typically rely on historical records without factoring in future risks. State and local officials use these data sources when designing infrastructure projects, making accurate data foundational to ensuring these local projects are built to last.

When we rebuild after disasters using decades-old data, we set communities up for continued failure and further devastation while wasting taxpayer funds. Instead, the federal government should improve federal data collection and better coordinate dissemination to ensure that communities clearly understand future flood hazards. The federal government should also incentivize state and local governments to use the best available data to underlie project plans and update building codes and standards.

With high-quality, forward-looking data and models provided by the federal government, state and local governments can create comprehensive resilience and adaptation plans, update building codes and standards, and strengthen nationwide resilience.

Focus on comprehensive regional efforts and coordinate these efforts nationally

To further reduce flood risk, governments should ensure that adaptation and resilience projects are grounded in an organized regional adaptation plan that aligns with a national strategy.

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[3] "How Nature Can Help Reduce Flood Risks." *The Nature Conservancy*, 28 Jan 2020.

Because flooding reflects watershed-level dynamics — in that water flows over the ground according to the terrain, natural buffers, and built environment with no regard for political boundaries — a watershed approach to flooding can maximize benefits for both upstream and downstream communities and deliver investments at the scale necessary to restore and enhance the surrounding natural environment. If adaptation projects increase the amount of water upstream communities retain, then communities downstream may also face decreased flood risk. By creating a more cohesive, regional approach that feeds into national efforts, we can ensure projects reinforce the impact and value to American taxpayers.

The federal government should incentivize state and local governments to take a regional approach that aligns with a national strategy to improve flood resilience. This approach will improve local outcomes and maximize the value of federal investments.

Train the climate adaptation and resilience workforce

The climate adaptation and resilience sector is rapidly growing. Jobs span a large number of industries — from construction workers that build rainwater retention facilities to engineers and public works employees who design and maintain municipal water systems, respectively.

By leveraging recent historic investments made by Congress, the federal government can strengthen the adaptation workforce. In fact, research from Johns Hopkins University finds that each billion dollars invested in flood-resilient infrastructure could be associated with up to 40,000 new jobs.[4] Aside from simply investing in more flood-resilient projects, the federal government should collaborate with industry, labor, and education stakeholders to assess workforce needs and support modern training and Registered Apprenticeship programs for career fields expanding into the adaptation and resilience space — including incentives to participate in proven and innovative training programs. Because flooding has affected 99% of counties across the country in the last 25 years,[5] we need a strong network of adaptation and resilience professionals across the U.S. Developing this workforce is key to building our national resilience to future flooding and other natural hazards, while boosting local economies.

By working with stakeholders from industry, labor, and education, the federal government can modernize and expand the climate adaptation and resilience workforce that will protect communities and local economies against natural hazards.

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[4] "The Local Economic Impact of Flood-Resilient Infrastructure Projects", *21st Century Cities Initiative at Johns Hopkins University* and the *American Flood Coalition*, 8 Dec 2020.
[5] "Get Flood Insurance." *Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)* and the *National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP)*, 24 Aug 2011.

Thank you for considering these values as the 118th Congress tackles federal resilience and adaptation policy. We appreciate your continued prioritization of these issues given their national impacts, and we look forward to supporting your individual and collective leadership in building a more resilient future.

Sincerely,

American Flood Coalition

American Society of Adaptation Professionals

Bipartisan Policy Center

BuildStrong Coalition

National Association of Clean Water Agencies

National Audubon Society

Rural Community Assistance Partnership

SBP

Smart Growth America

Team Rubicon

Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership

The Nature Conservancy

Woodwell Climate Research Center