



August 1, 2022

The Hon. Joseph R. Biden, Jr
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

The Hon. Kamala Harris
Vice President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Re: Request for Climate Emergency Actions in Support of Healthy Rivers

Dear President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris:

Thank you for your continued leadership on the environment, especially your recent steps to take greater administrative action to address climate change. We are especially grateful for your investments in helping communities reduce flood risks, and encourage you to go even further by declaring a climate emergency. Clean water and healthy hydrologic systems are vital to strong communities, and this will be even more true as our climate continues to change. Bold action is required. Declaring a national climate emergency will unlock the broad powers of the National Emergency Act (NEA) to improve water quality, reduce wildfires, enhance floodplain restoration, and protect vulnerable communities from climate change.

We write to you today to urge your administration to speed up investments to scale, transform urban environments to be more climate resilient, make sure every community can act, assess and conserve sources of freshwater in public lands, and reduce emissions from reservoirs and tear down barriers to action.

Speed Up Investments to Scale

- Increase funding in programs to reconnect rivers to floodplains and restore functioning ecosystems that can capture carbon, recharge groundwater, and buffer floodplain ecosystems and communities from floods. Accounts, like the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation (FWS), Engineering with Nature (USACE), the Emergency Watershed Protection Floodplain Easement account (USDA), and the Flood Mitigation Assistance account (FEMA) are crucial to these goals.
- Increase funding for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamations' WaterSmart grant program for faster adoption of water efficiency tools and focus investments in communities, like those in the west where water is becoming more scarce.
- Fund and reconvene the Water Resources Council, and/or Federal Interagency Floodplain Management Task Force to coordinate basin plans, allot grants to states for planning assistance, and coordinate federal initiatives to increase resilience to climate change impacts.
- Align applications across federal resilience programs, provide sufficiently long spending horizons to address the complexity of large infrastructure projects, and incentivize portfolios of projects that address multiple benefits.

- Allow states with integrated/multi-benefit floodplain restoration programs to combine federal funding sources to improve state’s capacity for the implementation of meaningful climate investments.
- Prioritize the rapid deployment of \$8.3 billion from Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) for the Colorado River Basin toward climate resilient investments that support connected river systems.
- Accelerate the deployment of IIJA funds to prioritize community supported projects that incorporate nature-based solutions that slow or reduce fire intensity and impact, such as the Trail Creek Restoration Project, the Upper Saguache Creek, and the Sierra Meadows Partnership Regional Meadow Restoration.
- Develop proactive watershed management practices to prevent or reduced impact of catastrophic fires by requiring the USFS to fund full time trained staff to plan and implement river-smart fuels management and to set aside a portion of the Joint Fire Science Program funding to collect data from process-based restoration projects on their effectiveness in preventing and mitigating wildfire impacts.

Transform Urban Environments to Be More Climate Resilient

- Increase Clean Water State Revolving Fund and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds (SRFs) funding and improve SRF processes and increase non-SRF direct federal funding such as Clean Water Act Section 319, to better support community-driven climate resiliency projects that equip urban and BIPOC communities with stronger adaptation strategies. These include neighborhood greening, flood risk reduction, groundwater recharge, and urban forest conservation.
- Double the percentage of capitalization grants going toward eligible Green Project Reserve projects, from 10 to 20 percent, and direct EPA to institute a better tracking and reporting system to identify natural and resilience projects funded per state and/or geographic location.
- Direct EPA Regional offices to emphasize inclusion of natural infrastructure requirements in review of state-issued stormwater permits, particularly including retrofit provisions to reduce water quality and other climate impacts associated with already built environments.
- Increase FEMA funding for nature-based solutions by establishing a 20% Green Project Reserve under the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) and Flood Mitigation Assistance (FMA) programs and requiring states to include nature-based solutions and climate adaptation activities in updates to State Hazard Mitigation Plans.

Make Sure Every Community Can Act

- Increase funding for FEMA’s Community Assistance Program- State Support Services Element (CAP-SSSE) to help reduce the gap in FEMA resource availability for low-income communities of color, which often don't have the municipal staff required to be eligible for pre disaster mitigation programs. Cost prohibitive barriers prevent low-income families and communities of color from tapping into the resources they need to reduce flood risk. Through CAP-SSSE, states can provide direct project management support for vulnerable populations to better plan for climate change.
- Strengthen Justice 40 by reducing or eliminating federal match requirements for disadvantaged communities.

- Expand educational opportunities at FEMA and EPA through their Emergency Management Institute, Emergency Operations Center, Office of Environmental Justice, and/or Public Engagement Office that all of which are designed specifically for community organizers and informal community leaders. Ministers, precinct committee members, NGO staff, and other informal leaders are critical to help community members more effectively interact with municipal staff and work to prevent and solve climate disaster issues within their communities.
- Require EPA to ensure infrastructure projects in disadvantaged communities are included in state Intended Use Plans (IUPs) and prioritize funding by providing additional guidance and clarity about pre-project construction costs that qualify for funding.
- Improve funding accessibility for protection and restoration of floodplains under existing programs such as BRIC and FMA programs.
- Require FEMA and HUD to better integrate programs for affordable housing with floodplain management to meet the housing needs of people who need to relocate and new affordable housing is located safely outside of the floodplain. The lack of resilient affordable housing remains a huge barrier for families looking to move away from flood prone areas. The need for climate-resilient, affordable housing is critical to frontline communities as they recover from and prepare for extreme weather.
- Increase transparency in addressing equity concerns within Hazard Mitigation Assistance Program, FMA, and BRIC programs by requiring FEMA to use the Community Resilience Estimates for Equity from the U.S. Census Bureau to prioritize communities exposed to disaster risk and authorize FEMA's Equity Enterprise Steering Group and Equity Advisor position.

Assess and Conserve Sources of Freshwater on Public Lands

- Assess climate change related social vulnerabilities and ecological risks to National Forest System watersheds, sourcewaters, and habitat important for biodiversity and community health.
- Develop recommendations for freshwater and watershed protection on all federal public lands building on and implementation of existing data sources and programs like the USFS' Watershed Condition Framework and Water Source Protection Program.
- Assess condition of waterways on Department of Interior lands modeled on the USFS' Watershed Condition Framework to guide protection and restoration of watersheds that provide ecosystem services to local communities.
- Direct U.S. Army Corps to identify levees on federal public lands and alter or setback levees to reconnect rivers to floodplains and allow more room to carry flood waters.

Reduce Emissions from Reservoirs and Tear Down Barriers to Action

- Establish a National Floodplain Protection and Restoration Program to better utilize federal floodplain management programs to protect and restore the nation's floodplains as carbon sinks and reduce flood damages. This interagency initiative should be launched under the authority of the Unified National Program for Floodplain Management to improve floodplain and watershed management. The initiative should set national goals for protection and restoration for floodplains, coordinate floodplain

data collection, create mapping and prioritization tools, and create an Integrated Flood Resilience Funding Pilot Program to distribute flood resilience funding more efficiently, effectively, and equitably to states for integrated floodplain management efforts/nature-based solutions to combat the increased frequency and intensity of flooding due to climate change.

- Assess the nation's dams for methane emissions, species resilience, flood risk, water temperature and other water quality impacts; and accelerate the process of removing dams that are obsolete and/or have these impacts by establishing an interagency and stakeholder advisory committee to improve the dam removal process and administer funding for dam removals.

Declaring a climate emergency and implementing these actions now can lower greenhouse gas emissions, reduce the potency of natural disasters and other extreme weather events, and provide much needed relief to families and vulnerable communities. Today, we need bold policy solutions that put America on a path to prosperity. As we address the climate crisis, we stand ready to work with you and support meaningful commitments to bolster climate resilience.

Thank you in advance for your consideration. We will contact your Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) staff for a follow up meeting but if you have any immediate questions about our recommendations, please contact Heather Taylor-Miesle, Senior Vice President of Advocacy and Regional Conservation at htaylor-miesle@americanrivers.org, and/or Ted Illston, Senior Director, Policy and Government Relations at tillston@americanrivers.org. We look forward to working with you.

Thank you for your leadership,



Thomas C. Kiernan
President and CEO
American Rivers