

The Nature Conservancy – American Littoral Society
New Jersey Future – NY/NJ Baykeeper – Clean Ocean Action

July 3, 2013

Mr. Michael Passante
New Jersey State Director
Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force
307 Middletown Lincroft Road
Lincroft, New Jersey 07738

Dear Mr. Passante:

We are a group of nonprofit conservation and planning organizations that have been engaged in promoting policies and practices for rebuilding of the New Jersey's coastal region in ways that the human and natural infrastructure are truly resilient in the face of rising sea levels and predicted future extreme weather. We believe that natural infrastructure and nonstructural techniques can be employed along with traditional infrastructure to restore and rebuild coastal areas to reduce the risk to both people and infrastructure for the long term. Although each of our organizations has interests in the recovery process that go beyond these topics, this letter addresses primarily natural disaster risk reduction.

Virtually all of the federal spending to date to help the State of New Jersey (State) and other affected states recover from Hurricane Sandy has correctly been focused on helping people get their lives back together. Now is the time to begin concrete plans for building a more resilient coast that is at less risk to flooding and other coastal hazards in order to avoid the suffering that has occurred as a result of inadequate planning and land preservation along our State's coastline. We believe that, Secretary Donovan, as Chairman of the Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force (Task Force) and head of the Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary, has the power to ensure that all allocations of federal recovery funding are coordinated to make New Jersey's coast more resilient, and that no federal funding be expended that would facilitate relocation of people and critical infrastructure into areas that will be vulnerable to sea level rise and future weather events. These objectives are embedded in President Obama's Executive Order (EO) establishing the Task Force, and charging it with the responsibility to prepare a Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Strategy (Strategy). Our organizations have prepared the following recommendations for incorporation into the Strategy. Although some of the recommendations apply to the Task Force as a whole, they were prepared primarily to aid in restoration and rebuilding efforts in New Jersey.

Section 3 (f) of the Executive Order states that the Task Force *shall engage local stakeholders, communities, the public, Members of Congress and other officials....to ensure that all parties have an opportunity to share their needs and viewpoints to inform the work of the*

Task Force, including the development of the Strategy. Based on this provision, we believe that **the public should be afforded the opportunity to review and provide comments on a draft of the Strategy document before it is presented to the President.**

To ensure additional transparency in the recovery process, **the Task Force should recommend the following:**

- 1. That proposed State Action Plans for use of CDBG-DR and Hazard Mitigation funds be subject to public hearings and a minimum ten-day comment period.**
- 2. That HUD maintain a website with information on all allocation and spending decisions regarding federal recovery funds.**

According to the EO, Section 5 (a) (ii) *the Strategy shall include a long-term rebuilding plan that...is informed by an assessment of current vulnerabilities to extreme weather events and seeks to mitigate future risks.* In light of this provision, **the Task Force should recommend to the President that all federal agencies cooperate in assessing risks from natural disasters to New Jersey communities over at least a fifty year timeframe which takes into account NOAA's projections of sea level and rise and future extreme storms.** This assessment should be formally developed and produced as a report/map or some other form that can be used to inform local and state officials, and the public about vulnerability of specific places.

The Task force should recommend that, in responding to grant requests, **federal agencies condition their funding to ensure that projects supported by their recovery funds and all future grants, will help to reduce or at least not exacerbate risks to New Jersey communities from potential natural disasters.** In this regard, HUD should condition approval of New Jersey's future Action Plans for CDBG-DR funds upon completion and publication by the State of a natural disaster risk assessment and corresponding plan to address those risks, including an identification of areas that have experienced repetitive losses from natural disasters, particularly flooding and storm surges, and a comprehensive plan to reduce such losses. This information should be made available to the public to help inform decision-making at all levels of government. While it is appropriate that disaster assistance funds go towards disaster recovery, it is also important that recovery also incorporates ways in which to mitigate future risks to decrease the likelihood and impact of future disaster events.

The Task Force should also recommend that **federal agencies, in deciding on which projects to fund in New Jersey, shall ensure that the projects support natural disaster risk reduction** by employing natural infrastructure where appropriate, such as restored wetlands and natural beaches and dunes, and non-structural risk reduction methods, such as buy-outs of vulnerable developed properties, as well as traditional hard infrastructure.

EO, Section 3 (c) states that the Task Force *shall identify and work to remove obstacles to resilient rebuilding in a manner that addresses existing and future risks and vulnerabilities and promotes the long-term sustainability of communities and ecosystems.* One of the obstacles to achieving resiliency is there is little expertise or capacity on the part of local governments to

restore flood prone lands to maximize risk reduction and ecological benefits. **The Task Force should recommend that federal agencies work to create an entity, possibly a nongovernmental or quasi-governmental organization that would maximize the benefits of preserved flood prone lands.** The entity would be authorized to receive federal funding, promote regional restoration plans and to provide technical assistance and on-the-ground capacity to restore formerly developed lands into natural areas that will provide disaster risk reduction and ecological benefits. The entity could enter into long term agreements to restore and manage publicly-owned lands, and also raise funds through both private fundraising and government programs targeted to land restoration.

The Task Force should recommend ways to assist municipalities with recovery and rebuilding efforts so that they have the capacity to conduct planning and implementation within a regional context. Federal funding should support three complementary approaches: 1) a regional cooperation program that incentivizes the voluntary formation of partnership among municipalities with a common interest; 2) expansion of the NGO-led Recovery and Resiliency Network that places Local Recovery Planning Managers and Circuit Riders to work in affected municipalities; and 3) more comprehensive hazard mitigation planning and implementation at all levels of government.

Thank you for considering our recommendations to the Task Force concerning natural disaster risk reduction. We would be happy to address any questions that you may have concerning these recommendations.

Sincerely,

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cc: Mr. Shaun Donovan, Secretary, Department of Housing and Urban Development
Ms. Laurel Blatchford, Executive Director, Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force
Mr. Jamie Rubin, New York State Director, Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force