

January 28, 2021

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Richard Durbin
Majority Whip
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Thune
Minority Whip
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Leader Schumer, Leader McConnell, Whip Durbin, and Whip Thune:

The SmarterSafer Coalition (SmarterSafer) is a diverse coalition of conservation and environmental groups, taxpayer-focused organizations, insurance and reinsurance interests, and housing advocates. As Congress turns its attention to comprehensive infrastructure legislation, SmarterSafer writes to express our priorities on the matter.

There is an important nexus between infrastructure funding and disaster preparedness. American infrastructure, including roads, bridges, and stormwater systems, was not designed to account for a changing climate and is ill-equipped to withstand natural catastrophic risks. Roads and bridges are buckling under higher temperatures, increased snowfall, wildfires, and disastrous flooding. Stormwater management systems are overwhelmed by natural catastrophes.

SmarterSafer members remain united in our support for fiscally sound, environmentally responsible approaches to natural catastrophe and infrastructure policy. As such, we encourage you and your colleagues to address the nation's failing infrastructure in a manner that balances environmental protection and better stewardship of taxpayer dollars.

Pre-Disaster Mitigation

The federal government currently spends more on post-disaster cleanup and reconstruction than on pre-disaster mitigation. That equation must change if we want to better protect our communities from future natural catastrophes. Pre-disaster mitigation efforts protect individuals and protect taxpayer dollars. Every \$1 invested in mitigation is estimated to save \$6 on post-disaster spending. These investments are particularly appropriate as many communities across the country anticipate another year of devastating natural disasters, which will increase their vulnerability at the same time they continue to grapple with the COVID-19 crisis. SmarterSafer supports many elements of H.R. 2, the *Moving Forward Act*, that were not enacted in the 116th Congress including greater funding for pre-disaster flood mitigation efforts and investments in natural infrastructure and deployment of climate-resilient technologies, the importance of which are outlined below.

Natural Infrastructure

Natural infrastructure—including healthy wetlands, forests, mangroves, and dunes—provides effective solutions to guard against flooding and erosion. NOAA estimates that U.S. coastal wetlands alone

provide \$23.2 billion in storm protection each year. During Hurricane Sandy, for example, wetlands reduced damages by more than 22 percent in more than half of the areas directly affected by the storm. Increased funding and incentives to protect and restore watersheds or forests will strengthen our communities and ecosystems. These natural features also provide important wildlife habitat and will assist in creating outdoor recreation opportunities and restoring tourism activity.

As we look to invest in climate-resilient and cost-effective infrastructure, greater emphasis should be placed on natural infrastructure that can absorb floodwaters and buffer and protect communities from increased catastrophic risk. Nature-based approaches should be used in combination with or as an alternative to gray infrastructure where feasible.

Climate-Resilient Infrastructure

From devastating wildfires in the Western United States to flooding in Houston to dam failures in Michigan, it's clear that our approach to infrastructure is failing. Climate resilient infrastructure is necessary to ensure that our families and communities are protected, as well as our future investments. Federal funds—whether provided through disaster assistance, Community Development Block Grants, or other programs—should be directed to outcome-driven projects that strengthen communities and reduce long-term risk. Federal infrastructure investments should require stronger minimum design standards and incorporate forecasts of future conditions for the lifespan of a structure.

In addition, high-quality information and data is necessary to inform strategic infrastructure investments and development decisions. SmarterSafer supports increased scientific climate data sharing within the government and between the public and private sectors. Bipartisan legislation like the *Built to Last Act*, introduced in the 116th Congress by Sens. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and Marco Rubio (R-FL), would ensure that standards-developing organizations that issue building codes have access to forward-looking meteorological information, including data on wildfires and other environmental trends.

Infrastructure in America's Floodplains

America's public infrastructure remains threatened by more frequent and severe flooding. SmarterSafer members are very supportive of President Biden's recent executive order restoring the federal flood protection standard as an important step in protecting lives, communities, properties, and taxpayer investments. SmarterSafer has long championed Senate efforts to reinstate such a standard, including through the *Federal Flood Risk Management Act of 2020*, introduced in the 116th Congress by Senators Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), Cory Booker (D-NJ), and Brian Schatz (D-HI), which would reinstate the federal flood risk management standard. While recent progress has been made, Congress should act to require government-funded agencies involved in floodplain construction to follow certain mitigation strategies to ensure that funds are used for projects that can withstand disasters. Along those lines, SmarterSafer also supports the *Repeatedly Flooded Communities Preparation Act*, also introduced in the 116th Congress by Senators Tim Scott (R-SC) and Brian Schatz (D-HI), that would require repeatedly flooded communities to assess continuing risks and develop and implement plans for flood mitigation.

We have consistently supported and will continue to ask Congress to consider preservation of green space and the elevation of structures above base-flood levels. Finally, Congress should also consider the racial inequities inherent in federal buyout programs that reflect and perpetuate discriminatory practices and historic redlining. According to numerous studies, buyouts disproportionately benefit white and wealthy communities. Low-income and minority homeowners and communities should be given priority

and additional assistance to address and balance the history of placing low-income and minority housing in areas of higher risk.

Risk Transfer

The United States has an infrastructure funding gap of more than \$2 trillion and the public sector alone cannot close it. Policymakers at all levels of government must find ways to make every dollar go further, and should consider enhanced public-private partnerships and risk-transfer opportunities. The private sector, particularly the insurance industry, has both the willingness and capacity to take on additional risk associated with natural disasters. Certain federal programs and agencies, including at the Federal Housing Finance Agency, the Export-Import Bank, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, already employ risk transfer strategies, but we believe more can be done in this space. By leveraging private financing and insurance and reinsurance availability, policymakers can shift some financial burdens associated with climate change from the government's balance sheet to willing private sector participants.

The Role of Climate Research in Infrastructure Investment

We encourage you to consider our nation's research infrastructure especially as it pertains to climate risk, ocean science, disaster resilient engineering, and green infrastructure. COVID-19 further demonstrates the need for more resilient, comprehensive, and efficient research infrastructure, and is revealing unmet needs that are hampering the fight against the coronavirus pandemic. Congress should consider new investments in research infrastructure that are important to enhancing our nation's overall capabilities and competitiveness for years to come, including American-organized or staffed not-for-profits conducting vital research abroad, whether at sea, in biodiverse habitats or other in situ locations important to furthering U.S. research objectives. Additionally, we would encourage the Senate to advance any forthcoming measure that aims to improve the sharing of climate information.

Thoughtful infrastructure spending can and should simultaneously provide economic growth, security for communities, and long-term savings for taxpayers. We greatly appreciate your efforts and consideration of the aforementioned suggestions that promote fiscally and environmentally responsible infrastructure. Our coalition stands ready to be a resource to you and your colleagues as legislation to forward your infrastructure platform takes shape.

Respectfully,

SmarterSafer Coalition

MEMBERS

Environmental Organizations

American Rivers
Center for Climate and Energy Solutions (C2ES)
ConservAmerica
Defenders of Wildlife
National Wildlife Federation
Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC)
Surfrider Foundation

Consumer and Taxpayer Advocates

Coalition to Reduce Spending
National Taxpayers Union
R Street Institute
Taxpayers for Common Sense
Taxpayers Protection Alliance

Insurer and Reinsurer Interests

Association of Bermuda Insurers and Reinsurers (ABIR)
The Chubb Corporation
Liberty Mutual Group
National Association of Mutual Insurance Companies (NAMIC)
National Flood Association
Reinsurance Association of America
Swiss Re
USAA

Mitigation Interests

Natural Hazard Mitigation Association

Housing

Habitat for Humanity
National Housing Conference
National Leased Housing Association

ALLIED ORGANIZATIONS

Allianz of America
American Consumer Institute
American Property Casualty Insurance Association (APCIA)
Center for Clean Air Policy
Friends of the Earth
Institute for Liberty
Zurich Insurance