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How the Corps of Engineers Can Help America Adapt to Climate Changes

Commentary by Howard Marlowe

If I had to choose one federal agency whose rules and processes were the most obscure and convoluted, the Army Corps of Engineers would beat out FEMA and the FAA by a long shot. The Corps is primarily a military engineering agency that can trace its history to the Revolutionary War. On the other hand, today it also has a civilian water resources mission that should put it on the front line of our nation's fight to adapt to climate change. As important as its civilian mission is, its budget of \$7 billion is a rounding error in the rest of the Department of Defense. Plucking it from the rear echelon so that state and local governments can take advantage of its technical know-how requires action from President Biden.

Coastal America is made up of 37 states with hundreds of local and tribal governments plus our Caribbean and Pacific territories. While this administration is already taking a huge step to make climate change a priority, most coastal communities already know they are in trouble. Climate change is a scientific term while flooding and erosion are real-life events that are threatening lives, lowering property values, and darkening their future. The tools to deal with these threats are well-known, but they are also both costly and politically challenging. Change is one of the constants of life, but community residents are naturally

February 18, 2021

inclined to resist it. To overcome that resistance, let's dangle money and professional help to communities and let them decide how it will be used within established local and state rules. Here is what I propose.

First, put the Corps' top official for all types of civilian water resources projects at the same table as the dozen or more other agencies that have a role in sea level rise and climate change. Charge all those agencies with coming up with specific actions they can take to reduce the risk of flooding and erosion over the next 24 months. Of course, they will need more funding, so give them 60 days to come up with their short-term action plan and put some real dollar figures on it so it can be made part of an infrastructure package that hits the floor of Congress in June. Specifically authorize the Corps to make recommendations regardless of whether they have cleared them through the Army, DoD or the White House Office of Management and Budget. OMB has been stifling the Corps for the past 20 years or more with micromanagement that has literally made 4-star generals and senior executive service civilians reluctant to speak their mind. Free them to speak up so they can put their planning and engineering skills to proactive use. Of course, finding the right cabinet-level official to put in charge will be the key to make such an inter-agency task force work, but the President has the depth on his first-string team to make that choice easier.

Second, we don't need more reports and plans. And while the Federal government is usually best when it is either providing grants or setting regulations, let's empower the states to act on climate change. My experience with federal grants is that Washington is too far away from local governments to be effective with funding for municipalities that aren't in the top 20-30 in population. On the coast, many states have resilience standards, regulations, or plans, and just about all of them want to get the municipalities to take the resilience and adaptation initiative. My team is developing a draft plan called Coast 2021 (we say 2021 is the Year of the Coast) that would authorize the Assistant Secretary of the Army (an Administration appointment) to apportion funds to each coastal state so they can set up revolving loan funds at no more than 1 percent interest over 20 to 30 years. Each state's coastal zone manager would be responsible for seeking applications and managing the loan fund. Congress created a similar type of revolving loan program for inland flooding in December to be managed by FEMA. What we propose, however, is a program that has two significant advantages for coastal communities. First, it is essentially locally driven. Counties and municipalities or groups of these entities would be the ones seeking funds from the state's revolving fund for projects that they have decided meet their needs and that meet state coastal zone management plans. Second, it allows the Corps of Engineers to offer their scientific and technical services at little to no cost to states and local grant recipients.

Under current laws and procedures, the Corps cannot act unless it gets a letter request from a state or local official that is processed through an Assistant Secretary of the Army and two congressional committees. Even if it makes it through those hurdles, the proposal must get funded by two more committees, and none of the four can earmark support for the project. Instead, OMB earmarks the Corps' budget. The two steps I have recommended won't change that disastrous system, but it will allow the Corps to be an equal and active participant with agencies such as HUD and FEMA in providing money for flexible, locally driven initiatives to attach coastal flooding and erosion.

If you have any questions, or would like to help support this initiative, please email me at Howard.Marlowe@warwickconsultants.net

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