

### **It's Time to Reduce the 'Fire Risk' Along the Nation's Coastlines**

By Howard Marlowe

What fire, you ask? Let me explain. The Biden administration has announced a plan to spend \$50 billion to reduce the risk of forest fires spreading to nearby inhabited areas. Given the tragedies in the last several years of communities being wiped out forest wildfires, this will be money well spent. One could argue that people should never have built homes so near a potential danger, but the fact is that the cow left that barn a long time ago. Communities have grown where America's natural resources made it attractive to live there but rising temperatures along with fires created by natural forces or human negligence have raised risks that once were more acceptable.



You can easily see the analogy to the coast. From the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans and the Great Lakes, homeowners and businesses that located to take advantage of the climate as well as coastal ports are finding that rising seas and a warming climate are raising risks to their safety. According to NOAA's Office of Coastal Management, 40 percent of the nation's population lives on our coasts accounting for 58.3 million jobs that produce \$3.8 trillion wages, and 45 percent of the nation's Gross Domestic Product. Federal taxes on coastal wages alone bring in over \$340 billion in revenues each year on top of taxes on business profits. Add to this the trains, airports, and highways as well as schools and hospitals that are at risk along the coasts and there is a clear need for this administration to make a game-changing investment to reduce risk, build resilience, and enable communities and businesses to adapt to rising seas.

Another \$50 billion investment would be a start, but even more than money, strong leadership is needed. Climate change is a real problem, and the Biden administration has made it a high priority. Unfortunately, none of its proposals have even mentioned the flooding, erosion and storms being experienced along our coasts. Congress has provided significant post-disaster funding, but pre-disaster mitigation grants are underfunded and suffer from the inability of our national government to deal with needs on a coordinated basis. Take, for example, the agency that I know best, the US Army Corps of Engineers. It doesn't make grants. It does water resources projects along the coasts and elsewhere, but it can only do projects requested by local officials and approved through a convoluted process mandated by Congress that was created to meet early 20<sup>th</sup> century needs. Cutting through this reactionary, onesie approach that affects far more than the Corps of Engineers requires leadership from both the President and Congress. Here is a short list of actions that can be taken that I will explore with more detail in future posts. I would like your thoughts, as well.

1. Allocate \$50 billion to the 37 coastal states to establish revolving funds for Coastal Resilience Grants that are distributed to communities to plan and implement coastal resilience and adaptation measures via low-cost loans that can be forgiven if risk reduction targets are met. \$50

billion is only a start but it gets money into the hands of state coastal officials who are far better able to know how to put the money to good use than anyone at the federal level.

2. Provide the Corps' extremely valuable technical assistance capabilities at no cost to communities participating in the Coastal Resilience Grant program. Existing programs such as Planning Assistance to States and Floodplain Management Services have been well-supported by both Congress and recent administrations. For this purpose, any cost-share they require would be eliminated, enabling Corps planners and engineers to provide the technical assistance communities need regardless of whether a resulting federal project is either desired or warranted.
3. Provide a waiver for any of the many coastal communities that have resilience needs but are unable to meet the Corps' benefit-cost requirements. The way the Corps calculates its BCR is different from and more rigorous than other federal agencies. It needs to be changed. In the meantime, let Congress decide which projects that do not meet the test it wants to fund.
4. Form a joint congressional committee to oversee restructuring the nation's water resources program so it can effectively deal with 21<sup>st</sup> century needs. Flooding and storms are not just a coastal problem and throwing money at rebuilding to pre-disaster conditions is wasting taxpayer dollars.
5. All federal efforts focused on building coastal resilience should give priority to collaborations among coastal communities. Flooding, erosion, sea level rise, and global warming affect regions and cannot be dealt with using a onesie approach.

There is one more crucial component that cannot be omitted. Over the last 35 years, I have seen how important it is for local governments to have a voice in Washington. The National League of Cities and U.S. Conference of Mayors along with the National Association of Counties do an excellent job providing that voice, but like all national associations, they cannot easily represent regional differences. Coastal communities need to be organized if any useful federal assistance to fight erosion and flooding is going to be forthcoming. The power of local elected officials to get congressional attention is huge, but it needs to be a collective voice. Many years ago, I was involved in the successes of the American Coastal Coalition. It successfully secured passage of legislation and opposed continual administration efforts to eliminate the federal beach nourishment program. Now, far more than beaches are at risk. There is a need for new leadership to form such an alliance now.

I look forward to your comments. If you prefer to offer them privately, please email me at [howard.marlowe@warwickconsultants.net](mailto:howard.marlowe@warwickconsultants.net).