

# Water Equity and Climate Resilience Caucus

## Secure Safe and Affordable Drinking Water and Equitable Infrastructure Systems for All

**Our freshwater and groundwater sources are threatened, infrastructure is crumbling, and people are suffering because of it.** Nearly 77 million Americans are served by drinking water systems with one or more Safe Drinking Water Act violations.<sup>1</sup> Poor quality and unaffordable water has ripple effects on people's lives and health, and disproportionately impacts vulnerable populations, such as children, elders, pregnant women, low-income communities, and communities of color. Many decision makers often view safe and affordable separately, but they are integrally connected. These issues are caused by not having adequate resources to invest in safe drinking water at affordable rates, and the systems are facing more frequent and extreme climate-related stresses.

To address these real-time economically, socially, and structurally devastating impacts, members of Congress have a responsibility to prioritize three critical measures:

- Ensuring vulnerable communities have universal access to safe and affordable drinking water.
- Ensuring vulnerable communities receive equitable investments in water infrastructure systems, including drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater.
- Ensuring vulnerable communities are involved in democratic decision-making processes and good governance over their water systems.



Leaders and residents of the San Joaquin Valley demand clean water for their children and communities. (Community Water Center)

## The Importance of Affordability Protections

The lowest 20 percent of income earners pay up to 20 percent of their monthly income on water. If rate hikes continue at the pace of the last decade, more than one-third of all U.S. households, 35.6 percent, will be unable to afford running water by 2022.<sup>2</sup>

### Key Policy Recommendations to Secure Water and Infrastructure Equity

- ✓ Ensure no households can be denied access to safe drinking water due to inability to pay
- ✓ Ensure equitable investments in sustainable groundwater, wastewater, and stormwater management
- ✓ Require mechanisms for community representation on local and regional water boards

**This is not just the “right thing to do” but it is essential for this society to navigate skillfully in this current period of climate calamity and resource scarcity.**

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1. Kristi Pullen Fedinick, Mae Wu, and Erik D. Olson, “Threats on Tap: Widespread Violations Highlight Need for Investment in Water Infrastructure and Protections”, NRDC, May 2, 2017, <https://www.nrdc.org/resources/threats-tap-widespread-violations-water-infrastructure>.
  2. Elizabeth A. Mack and Sarah Wrase, A Burgeoning Crisis? A Nationwide Assessment of the Geography of Water Affordability in the United States, January 11, 2017, <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0169488>

# Policy Priorities for Water Equity and Climate Resilience

The following recommendations address the threats that communities of color, Indigenous communities, and low-income communities face that deny them equitable access to improved water systems and climate resilience services and resources.

## Policy Goals

Safe and affordable drinking water, sanitation, and storm water management is provided for the 100 million residents of U.S. and Indigenous communities who are near or below the poverty line.

Marginalized and vulnerable communities—low income, communities of color, and those proximate to and reliant on threatened waters—meaningfully participate in water and climate resilience planning and implementation. Communities of color and low-income communities can access disaster resources that prioritize their recovery and their climate security.

Educational, job, and business opportunities are targeted to low-income people and people of color in designing, building, operating, and maintaining sustainable water infrastructure systems.

## Key Policy Actions

1. Guarantee universal access to safe and affordable water.
2. Honor cultural and spiritual access to water in public lands policy and protections.
3. Prioritize water infrastructure investments to vulnerable communities (high poverty, unsafe drinking water, flood-prone, sea-level rise compromised).
4. Structure resources to require democratic decision making and equity-focused governance.
5. Protect communities and community assets through disaster and resilience planning that prioritizes low-income communities and communities of color.
6. Invest in pre-disaster resilience, retrofit and mitigation actions.
7. Invest in innovations that protect natural ecosystems and processes.
8. Make flood and disaster insurance accessible to low-income homeowners, renters, and small businesses.
9. Structure federal disaster assistance to prioritize lowest income survivors for recovery.
10. Hold contributing industries accountable for climate and water impacts.
11. Create an integrated system of education, workforce, and small business development in green water systems and climate resilience.
12. Structure targeted local hiring and inclusive procurement in the build out of water infrastructure from communities of color and communities left behind in the current economy.

For further information, contact:

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[www.policylink.org/our-work/community/water-climate](http://www.policylink.org/our-work/community/water-climate)

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# Targeting Education, Training, Workforce Development and Business Opportunities in Climate Resilient Water Systems



**The U.S. needs to address dual imperatives: to increase water infrastructure investment and fill the chronic labor shortages in the water sector.** New investment creates a unique opportunity to engender economic inclusion in resilient water systems while tackling the legacy of racial and gender discrimination and exclusion in the water infrastructure and construction industries. Demonstrated success in youth engagement, apprenticeships, local hiring measures, local procurement policies, and supply-side training and support all offer pathways to both increase the equitable outcomes across communities and address the climate resilience of diverse environments.

- Workers of color are underrepresented in a water sector made up of 66 percent older White males; 15 percent women; 11.5 percent Black and Asian combined; and 22 percent Hispanic.
- The majority of contractors of color have capacity for \$500,000 to \$2 million contracts; but \$5 million thresholds are required to win contracts on large water infrastructure projects.

**To address these real-time economic impacts, Congress has a responsibility to prioritize three critical measures:**

- Creating an integrated system of education, workforce, and small business development for low-income people and people of color in designing, building, operating, and maintaining U.S. and Indigenous communities' water and resilience infrastructure.
- Structuring targeted local hiring and inclusive procurement in the build out of water infrastructure from communities of color and communities left behind in the current economy.
- Ensuring that equitable investments in vulnerable communities' water infrastructure systems include their apprenticeship, labor force, and business inclusion.

## The Importance Of Economic Inclusion

Water is currently one of the largest sectors in the U.S. economy. Multibillion, multidecade investments are underway with the potential to build career pathways and intergenerational wealth. This sector includes over 1.7 million jobs, including 298,000 utility jobs and 1.4 million other water-related employers, led by plumbing contractors and construction firms. The jobs are spread across the U.S. and constitute 1 to 2 percent of jobs in urban and rural communities.

### Key Policy Recommendations to Secure Water and Infrastructure Equity

- ✓ Codify a 30 percent local hire and a 20 percent local procurement goal for all water investments and management contracts
- ✓ Increase funding for the Environmental Protection Agency Brownfields Environmental Workforce Development and Job Training Grants from FY 2018 levels of \$3 million to \$250 million and for the Environmental Health Sciences [Environmental Career Worker Training Program](#) from FY 2018 levels of \$3.5 million to \$250 million to expand these effective opportunities to scale.
- ✓ Incentivize strengthened ecosystems of Minority, Women, and Disadvantaged Business Enterprise stakeholders, and strengthen the capacity of these firms to compete for large contracts.

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**A PowerCorps PHL Corpsmember getting hands-on experience at the Philadelphia Water Department. (The Corps Network)**



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## Support Communities Impacted by Rising Water, Flooding, and Drought

**Climate-related flooding, sea level rise, and waste water exposures are steeply increasing.** These climate-driven water events expose entire regional populations to water-related pathogens, chemicals, and algal toxins; they cause flood-related losses to homes that deepen long-term poverty for low-income uninsured homeowner and renter households; and portions of cities and counties at or below the four-foot high tide line are predicted to be underwater in typical 100-year storms. Almost five million people and 2.4 million homes are living within threatened areas predicted to be inundated by the end of the century.<sup>1</sup> African American, Indigenous, Latino, and low-income communities suffer the lowest recovery rates from these risks.

To address these real-time economically, socially, and structurally devastating impacts, members of Congress have a responsibility to prioritize two critical measures:

- Ensuring vulnerable communities—low income, communities of color, and those proximate to climate- threatened waters—engage in resilience planning and implementation of mitigation measures.
- Ensuring vulnerable communities have access to disaster resources that prioritize their climate security through climate preparedness, recovery, and resilience.



Along the I-90 corridor, the beaches of Gulfport continue to recover from the BP Oil Spill and increasingly severe hurricanes. (PolicyLink)

## The Importance of Climate Impact Protections

The federal government and its affiliates invest billions of dollars in climate recovery efforts. It goes without saying that investing in infrastructure *before* disaster is the most cost-efficient and sustainable use of tax payer dollars: it protects communities from harm and displacement, mitigates costly health impacts, and protects natural ecosystems to name a few.

### Key Policy Recommendations to Protect Communities and Community Assets

- ✓ Conduct universal resilience planning and investment
- ✓ Ensure accessible flood/disaster insurance at population levels
- ✓ Hold polluting industries accountable for climate impacts
- ✓ Invest in innovation that protects natural ecosystems and processes

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1. Olivia Rosane, “Sea Level Rise Could Put 2.4 Million Homes at Risk,” EcoWatch, June 18, 2018, accessed at <https://www.ecowatch.com/sea-level-rise-coastal-homes-2579179782.html>

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