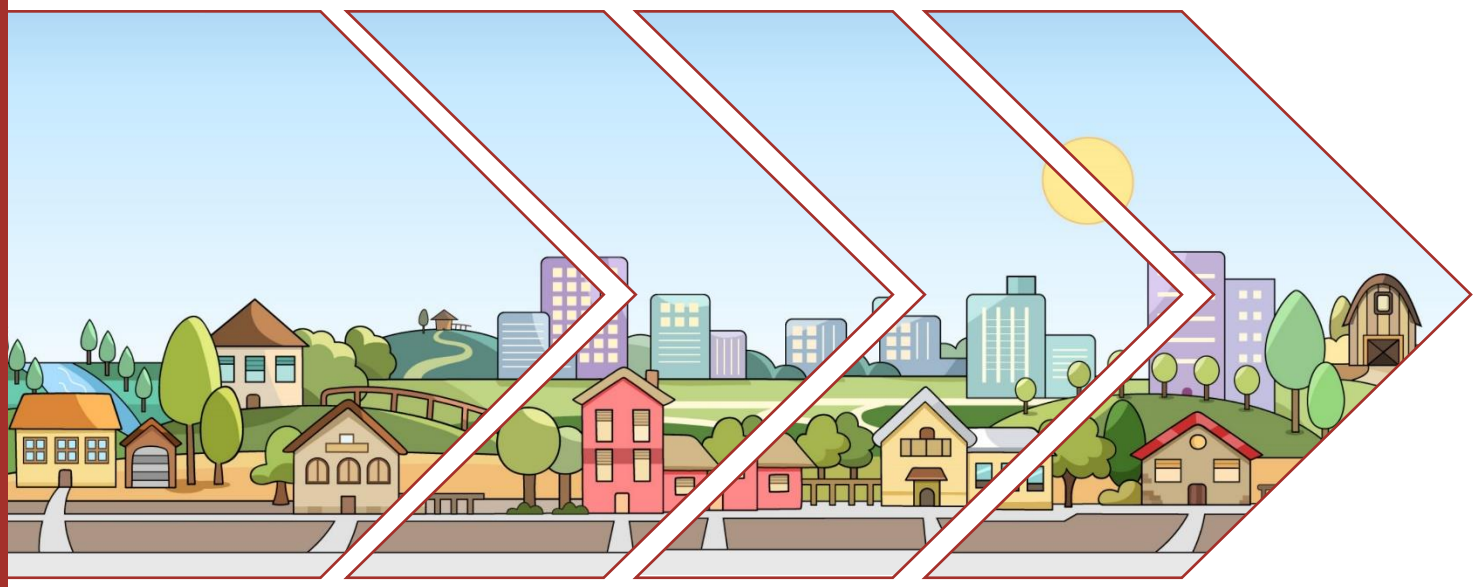
CLIMATE READY AMERICA

How a nationwide system of climate resilience services for local leaders can help the U.S. meet its climate goals



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Summary

The Geos Institute proposes a nationwide system of climate resilience services through the development of four federal anchor programs and a service delivery system to leverage those programs and bring them to the ground in communities. This service delivery system will be a public-private partnership that delivers the climate resilience (adaptation and mitigation) services needed by local leaders, while tracking and reporting on the progress being made in communities across the nation.

Urgency

We must reduce global greenhouse gas emissions by 45% by 2030 to avoid catastrophic impacts (IPCC, 2018). In his first days in office, President Biden committed the U.S. to zeroing out emissions of heat-trapping gases by 2050. He will soon unveil our nation's 2030 goals for greenhouse gas emissions. However, because we have not taken sufficient action to date to reduce our emissions, climate change impacts have already arrived in the form of record-breaking storms, heat, wildfire, droughts, and flooding. These impacts disproportionately impact frontline communities and will worsen for decades, bringing financial, social, and psychological strain that impairs our collective ability to focus on the work of reducing emissions.

Had we taken aggressive action starting in the 1990s, we could have focused primarily on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but that window of opportunity has closed. The lateness of the hour, and the reality of climate change-driven disasters, requires that America's response to the climate crisis integrates climate adaptation and mitigation (collectively "climate resilience") in a comprehensive manner that works to correct systemic social inequities and restore natural systems. A nationwide system of climate resilience services is necessary if we are to put this integrated response in place and meet our climate goals. With the infrastructure bill on the horizon, this system is particularly necessary to ensure that underserved communities can make the best use of that investment and actually "Build Back Better."

New Opportunities

The Biden Administration has taken important action in its first days to eliminate counter-productive policies of the Trump Administration and point the U.S. in the direction it needs to go to address the climate crisis (The White House, 2021). What remains are the decisions about how to invest public and private resources in the most effective manner to head off the climate crisis, particularly given that many climate-related decisions, by their nature, must be made at local, state, and regional levels.

Converging Trends

Several important trends and realities must be considered when making these climate-related investments:

The lack of meaningful technical support and capacity at the local level

- There are increasing regulatory mandates pushing local governments to undertake climate resilience planning (Moser et al, 2017), yet technical support is generally lacking and varies by state.
- Most communities do not have staff members trained in climate resilience planning and implementation.
- Communities are making climate pledges through organizations, such as the Global Covenant of Mayors and America's Still In, but adequate technical assistance is not available to help them meet those

commitments. This is a particularly significant issue for small to mid-sized, under-resourced, and rural communities.

Growing concern in financial and economic markets

- The financial markets are increasingly integrating climate risk into finance and investment structures as evidenced by moves to ensure that municipal credit ratings reflect climate risk (Flavelle, 2019–7/24; U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, 2021).
- Insurance companies are pulling back from high-risk areas, which affects homeowners and businesses and may leave some areas uninsurable in the future. (Flavelle, 2019–8/20).
- Mainstream economic forces are taking an interest in climate risk, including realtors and chambers of commerce (Clark, 2020; U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2021).

Lack of a consistent approach for implementation and monitoring

- By rejoining the Paris Climate Agreement, President Biden is committing the United States to consistent reporting on both climate mitigation and adaptation efforts, but there is no standardized structure to gather and report that data from all sectors on a regular basis.
- Climate resilience plans are not consistently implemented in communities (Moser et al, 2017).
- It is considered best practice in the adaptation field to ensure that resilience solutions are socially equitable, ecologically sound, and do not negatively impact our ability to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (American Society of Adaptation Professionals, 2017), but there is no mechanism in place to help ensure local solutions are designed and implemented accordingly.

A Nationwide System of Climate Resilience Services

Given the urgent need to act at all levels of government and across all states and jurisdictions, it is critically important that a nationwide system of climate change resilience services is developed to help local leaders with both adaptation and mitigation planning and implementation. Such a system will help the U.S. do its part to reduce the eventual magnitude of the climate crisis while protecting nature and people, especially frontline communities, as the changes unfold.

Goals

While it is not possible to know every step required and who would be responsible, it is possible to assemble a set of goals for a system of climate resilience services. The system should:

Directly support community action

- Provide technical support for all steps in the process (planning through finance and implementation), including connecting communities to state and federal agencies for specific support needs;
- Ensure that frontline communities receive the support they need to build climate resilience;
- Work through trusted and pre-established networks to provide information to local governments;
- Strengthen local adaptive capacity, readiness, and the ability to make use of federal investments;
- Provide climate training through established workforce training programs;
- Meet communities where they are and provide appropriate resources to meet their needs;
- Make it easier, faster, and less expensive for communities to build climate resilience; and
- Make it simpler to identify, integrate, coordinate, and fund resilience strategies across jurisdictions.

Promote best practices and regularly update information and processes

- Encourage adaptation and mitigation strategies that are socially equitable, ecologically sound, cost-effective, and avoid unintended negative consequences;
- Scale best practices from both climate adaptation and mitigation fields; and
- Co-create and regularly update the system through feedback processes with those served by it.

Provide consistency and measure outcomes

- Be robust in the face of partisan politics by tracking effectiveness of the investment in terms of speed and cost of planning, implementation progress, and changes in climate-resilience related metrics;
- Assist the U.S. in meeting its climate commitments to the global community by working with existing climate reporting organizations on a common framework for local reporting on climate actions;
- Align government funding programs and ensure a pipeline of high quality and effective projects; and
- Create consistent general climate resilience planning standards while ensuring there is enough flexibility so that each community can determine the best way for it to meet those standards.

System Elements

This system of nationwide climate resilience services requires two elements: Anchor Programs and a Service Delivery System to help local governments make use of the tools and resources available. When done well, this system will spur additional investment from federal, state, local, and philanthropic sources.

Anchor Programs

Federal agencies have performed magnificently over the past four years, maintaining climate tools and resources while directly serving communities in a very hostile environment. In the development of this system, however, it is necessary to focus the federal system on what it does best – delivering those tools and resources and partnering with boundary organizations to support community decision-making. The federal government is too constrained to be able to offer effective, direct technical support at scale. Four anchor elements are necessary and best developed or strengthened through the federal system:

- a **nationwide climate data program** that allows community leaders to easily access robust and trusted information regarding current local conditions and future climate projections;
- a **database of climate resilience strategies** that identifies how each strategy impacts natural systems, frontline communities, and climate resilience goals;
- a **finance program** that helps communities address emerging insurance issues, quantifies the financial impact of pre-disaster investments in climate resilience, aligns federal funding programs to encourage/require local climate resilience planning, and develops innovative financing solutions; and
- a program of **direct funding support** for communities across the U.S. to build the capacity necessary to develop resilience plans and implement them over time.

Service Delivery System (Public-Private Partnerships)

There is a growing awareness that no one entity or organization can do it all and the way forward will require public-private partnerships that involve climate resilience practitioners, many of whom are already in place and ready to deliver services if they can be brought together in an effective system with adequate resources. This system will leverage the anchor programs, as well as existing state and regional resilience programs, and

bring them to ground in communities. It will also manage feedback flows between the on-the-ground practitioners and those who operate anchor programs and develop resources. To that end:

- **Statewide affiliate programs** may be the most effective way to deliver support services given that local governments often turn to state level professional associations and governmental programs for assistance. Statewide programs could be hosted by state governments or civic/professional organizations.
- **Regional Support Teams** can be an effective mechanism to provide technical support (climate science, community engagement, financing, planning, etc.) to multiple state level programs. This role may be performed by existing regional organizations.
- Consistent support of **cohorts of communities** supported by statewide affiliate programs can help large numbers of communities move quickly through climate resilience planning processes to implementation.

Next Steps

1. The federal government collaborates with experienced adaptation and mitigation practitioners to **develop and/or strengthen the four anchor elements of this system**, formally launching with the upcoming fiscal year budget this fall.

2. A working group of adaptation and mitigation leaders from government, academic, non-profit, and for-profit sectors brings existing climate resilience resources together to **develop the service delivery system** and determines the best way to fill identified gaps.

3. **Philanthropic partners** come together to fund the working group as well as organizations that will implement the service delivery system in collaboration with the federal government.

Conclusion

The Biden Administration has begun the critically important work of integrating the needs of frontline communities and the environment across the federal system. It has also taken aggressive steps to move our nation forward in addressing the climate crisis. At the same time, both the Senate Democrats' Special Committee on the Climate Crisis and the House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis have put forward similar goals. A recent report by the Brookings Institution (Litan and Fleming, 2021) points to the need to move forward aggressively and simultaneously with both adaptation and mitigation. And community leaders across the U.S. are asking for help as they deal with extreme climate events that threaten their economies, environment, infrastructure, health, and culture. The establishment of a nationwide system of climate resilience services will propel real progress on these three goals – climate resilience, equity, and the environment – and make tangible change in American communities.

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