

CLIMATE READY AMERICA

A Nationwide System of
State-Specific Climate Resilience Services



Details and a structural framework for helping local communities develop meaningful climate action with support from state, regional, and federal systems.

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GEOS
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Summary

Globally, we have less than 10 years to transition our energy systems and address increasingly severe climate impacts at scale if we are to head off the worst effects of the climate crisis.¹ While national level policies are needed, so too are actions taken by local governments. Climate work has started in some fashion in every state and many communities and organizations are taking important steps. However, it is a patchwork effort with many communities still left behind. Why? They are often constrained by issues, such as local capacity, financial resources, political will, geography, types of risk, poverty, and historic inequity. Community leaders need technical and funding assistance if they are to do their part on climate.

Some states are actively working to develop climate services. States are a natural place for these services because state legislatures pass laws that all communities in the state must abide by, and state law determines the level of authority local governments are able to exercise. Both of these change state by state. Because of this structure, local governments tend to look to state government or state level organizations for help with all manner of planning – from emergency management to comprehensive or general plans to natural hazard mitigation planning. They also look to in-state colleagues for policy templates, particularly on new issues, such as climate resilience.

To achieve the outcomes needed by 2030 requires:

1. Aligning current in-state efforts in mitigation, adaptation, and equity
2. Increasing the capacity and resources of existing climate programs
3. Identifying and addressing gaps in current services and support

Disparate state level efforts must be supported and brought together to assist local governments in a national, scalable, effective, and equitable infrastructure of climate resilience services that integrates climate adaptation and mitigation.

Climate Ready America is such an infrastructure – a bridge from climate risk to national resilience, with no community left behind. This paper outlines a path to build on the good work already underway in all fifty states and quickly scale and effectively propel climate resilience efforts forward. While we continue to refine the Climate Ready America concept, the next steps are clear:

- ▶ identify five states to bring existing climate services together into pilot, state-level Climate Innovation Centers,
- ▶ secure government or philanthropic funding to support the pilots, and
- ▶ strengthen partnerships with national, regional, state, and local governments and organizations to build the system.

Introduction

For over a decade, local leaders have been calling for higher quality climate services that are more accessible, user-friendly, and affordable to help them achieve their climate action goals and initiatives.

In response, the Geos Institute co-led a process to develop principles for a climate services system. The result, a "[Call for a Nationwide System of Climate Services](#)", was released in September 2021 and delivers the message to the federal government of the urgent need for this system. Signed by over 40 climate resilience organizations and professionals, this document identifies 10 principles that must underpin any nationwide climate services system:

- ▶ Addresses both mitigation and adaptation in a comprehensive approach to climate resilience
- ▶ Centers the needs of frontline communities and the imperative of building equity and environmental justice
- ▶ Preserves and strengthens the resilience of ecological systems
- ▶ Ensures credible climate science and modeling information is accessible to all communities
- ▶ Directly funds and enables community-based planning and implementation to build local adaptive capacity
- ▶ Catalyzes the development of the climate resilience workforce to create jobs and foster climate smart economies
- ▶ Leverages and supports existing organizations and networks, including academic, private sector, non-profit, and philanthropic organizations
- ▶ Utilizes a whole of society approach across federal, state, Tribal, and local jurisdictions
- ▶ Employs institutional mechanisms that ensure long-term sustainability of the system
- ▶ Responds to the needs of the public and communities across the U.S.

Climate Ready America (CRA) is a climate services infrastructure framework, developed by the Geos Institute with input from other resilience service providers, local government officials, and government agency representatives, that will deliver on this call to action.

Ground Level Realities

In anticipation of a national climate services program, Geos Institute conducted a high-level Landscape Analysis of existing climate action in every state. The information gleaned provides many insights into how to structure a rapidly scalable framework most effectively. The following realities emerged from the analysis.

Every state is different. Each has different types of climate programs in place and capacities within those programs. Existing efforts must be optimized and unique gaps filled. Therefore, a top down, one size fits all approach will not be effective. An effective approach requires some standardization, but also the ability to customize climate services state by state. Factors that strongly affect state differences include:

Socioeconomic:

- ▶ Political perspectives of state and local government officials
- ▶ Climate focus of state and local governments – many focus on either mitigation or adaptation, but often not both
- ▶ Economic status of the state - including the wealth generated by industries, such as farming, coal mining, tourism, etc. - and who is benefiting from that wealth
- ▶ Levels of poverty, inequity, and the size of marginalized communities

Technical Support:

- ▶ Organizational capacity and climate commitment of long-standing bodies such as Cooperative Extension programs, county and municipal leagues, local conservation groups, etc.
- ▶ Presence or absence of federally funded climate programs
- ▶ Climate priorities and perspectives held at in-state universities

Environmental:

- ▶ Type of disasters causing most current harm and concern
- ▶ Natural systems threatened by climate change

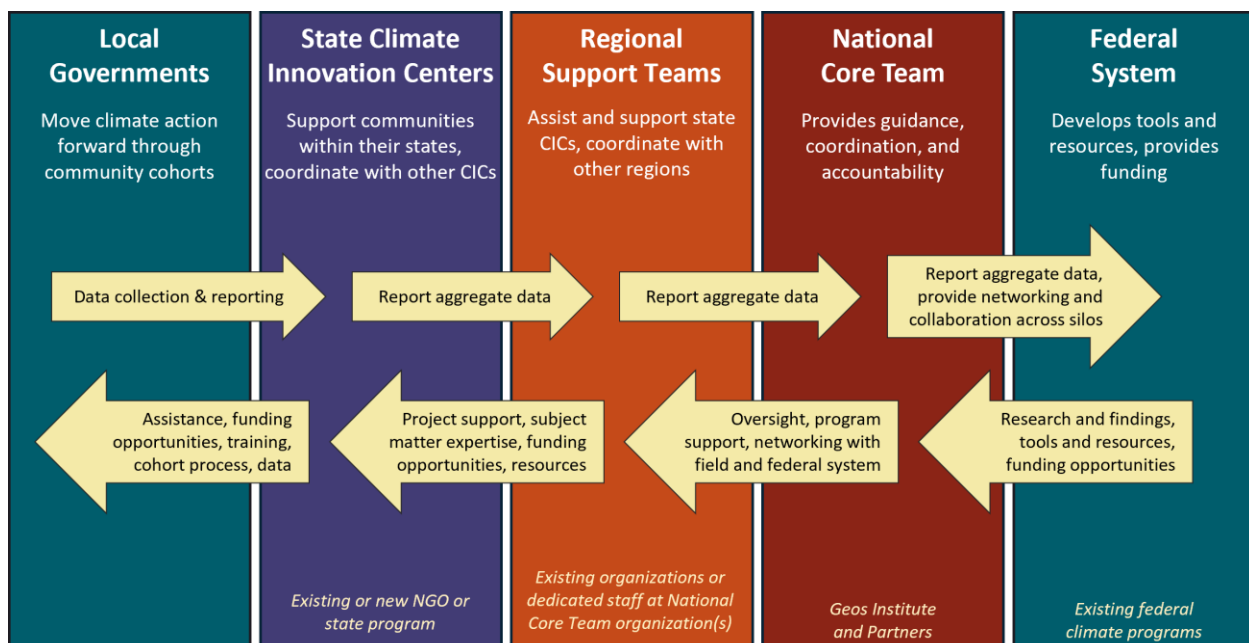
Based on the above factors, every state has existing strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in their current climate efforts and programs. Few states have comprehensive climate resilience programs that integrate all existing climate work and endeavor to create a unified and collaborative effort statewide. Where work is happening, data on successes, failures, and needs ranges from poor to non-existent.

Considering the on-the-ground realities across the US, and the existing support channels organized at the state level, a state-centric structural framework is ideal for a nationwide climate services system. Such a framework can be designed to scale

quickly, organically, and strategically to achieve rapid and effective progress. A standard, but customizable, state-by-state structure will be able to incorporate and support existing momentum, foster cross-fertilization and learning, and gather data on progress toward climate targets while avoiding the individuals, groups, or politics that would slow or inhibit progress.

A Nationwide System

Five key elements are needed for this nationwide system: local governments, state-level support centers, regional content support, a central organizing entity, and the federal system of agencies working on climate resilience. We propose that these elements be addressed as follows:



Local Government

While local government is the optimal scale for specific types of climate action, their roles and actions are now, and will continue to be, different in every state. In this system, local governments working to take climate action will look primarily to their state-level Climate Innovation Centers for general assistance, funding opportunities, training, cohort processes, and data to help them move local climate action forward. A particular focus will be on meeting the climate resilience needs of under-served and under-resourced communities in each state. They will also participate in data collection efforts to measure progress and refine tools and resources. As Climate Innovation

Centers are developed over time, local governments will be able to create partnerships and engage in regional planning and strategy efforts within their state more easily. The shared characteristics of local governments interacting with Climate Innovation Centers include a commitment to: credible climate and other relevant science, social equity, preserving and strengthening ecological systems, collaboration within a whole community approach, transparency to ensure accountability, and consistent data gathering and reporting.

Climate Innovation Centers

The primary service delivery element of the Climate Ready America system is the Climate Innovation Center (CIC), a one-stop shop for local governments to act on climate – both mitigation and adaptation. While the CICs will have standard functions, each will be customized to meet the specific needs of the communities within their state. Each state needs its own as CICs will incorporate and strengthen existing programs, while filling gaps in climate services.

Where possible, the CIC will be embedded within the state government. However, our Landscape Analysis made it clear that this will not be possible in some states. In those circumstances, existing civic or academic organizations could host the CIC. Existing climate actors in each state will come together to lead the development of their CIC - choosing where and how to set it up, how to invest funding, and how to maintain and grow the offerings of the CIC over time.

Each CIC will receive science, technical, equity, and management support from Regional Support Teams which, in turn, will be connected to federal agencies and academic institutions. This will allow the CICs to most effectively direct expertise, resources, and funding to communities.

Specific tasks of the Climate Innovation Center:

- ▶ Provide a networking hub for climate efforts across the state
- ▶ Identify and work to fill climate service gaps
- ▶ Support implementation by connecting communities with funding opportunities and strengthening their capacity to apply for funding and manage projects
- ▶ Bring mitigation, adaptation, and equity efforts into alignment
- ▶ Facilitate training for climate resilience skillsets: mitigation, adaptation, social equity, and change management
- ▶ Provide tools and capacity assistance for small, underfunded, and underserved communities, including connecting local governments with extension and national service programs

- ▶ Facilitate region-scale planning efforts
- ▶ Support cohorts of communities in developing and implementing climate resilience plans
- ▶ Maintain a website with resource links and a Help Desk for personalized support
- ▶ Identify and secure additional sources of federal and philanthropic funding for CIC programs and the communities they support
- ▶ Gather and report data from local governments and their partners to track outcomes, develop best practices, assist state policy development, prioritize funding needs, and facilitate national reporting for global climate commitments
- ▶ Establish virtuous cycles where positive outcomes attract support, keeping the program growing of its own momentum, until all communities are supported.

Regional Support Teams

The Regional Support Teams will be nationally networked, but independently organized so that they can effectively connect and support state level Climate Innovation Centers, both across states and with regional and federal resources and programs. Each team will begin by evaluating existing regional efforts to identify redundant programs and coordinate complementary ones. These teams will be a nexus where data, outcomes, learning, and innovation can feed in from CICs and be shared with neighboring states. In addition, the states can look to their Regional Support Team for project support, expertise, funding opportunities, and other resources. These teams will help the CICs and the communities they serve access federal programs and expertise and are likely to include representatives of federal agencies to facilitate that coordination. Regional support teams are the primary way that federal agencies will be integrated into the system in terms of programs, data, and technical content and support. That expertise will include climate science, engagement, social equity, finance, facilitation, and change management.

A unique element of the Regional Teams is the presence of organizational and change management expertise. It is increasingly recognized that responding to the climate crisis is not just about science, but also the complex human dimension of change.² The knowledge of how to help both individuals and systems, such as local governments, siloed departments, or community groups, incorporate the needed changes is a significant and pressing stumbling block of existing efforts. Therefore, the Regional Support Teams will also include human-system change knowledge and expertise to support the Climate Innovation Centers and their local communities. It is expected that the 50 states will be divided into 8-10 regions that align in some way with one or more of the federal agencies that operate regionally.

National Core Team

A National Core Team will serve as the central organizing element that ensures accountability and maintains alignment across the system. This team will focus on the national big picture while fostering ever better connectivity to ground level communities. It will also serve as the primary entity to engage with the federal government regarding system-wide funding. This structural element provides strong oversight and accountability through a commitment to transparency in all actions and transactions with those engaged in the Climate Ready America system.

In addition, the National Core Team will be able to source, draw on, and partner with critical expertise from the field of practitioners, consultants, funders, and organizations in the climate field. National networking and collaboration-building between currently siloed or disconnected groups or agencies will take place here, developing broader awareness, opportunity, efficiency, and momentum. This Team will facilitate processes with partners in the system to develop consistent standards of practice to ensure that best practices are employed throughout the system, from trainings to resources, and planning to implementation projects. This team will be responsible for the development, staffing, and oversight of Regional Support Teams in collaboration with the state CIC's.

Federal System

The Federal System includes federal agencies that are making important contributions to the climate resilience field and must be a foundational anchor in this system. Climate commitment varies by state and resources are scarce for the most part, so federal agencies directed by the administration will be an essential element of this system. In addition, a great deal of critical research and data generation happens at the federal level and those resources must be connected more efficiently to the ground. While all federal climate programming may eventually be brought under a single programmatic umbrella, this system does not require that structural change. Rather, agency representatives will work through their initiatives with Regional Support Team members, which will connect them with Climate Innovation Centers and local governments to extend the reach and utility of those initiatives.

Climate Ready America will be designed to streamline access to federal resources by the communities that need them, and to do so in an accountable manner, such that funds are not wasted, garnered by special interests, absorbed by complex hierarchies, or used on low priority/low benefit programs. In addition, the Climate Ready America system will gather information about emerging needs from local governments and their partners to inform development of federal resources.

Learning and Growing Over Time

The elements identified in this document are the beginning anchors in a system that will build on real world learning and evolve over time. Adjustments will be made as knowledge is gained from the initial pilots, funding programs, and efforts to identify and fill gaps, state by state. The system will be built out, maintained, and re-invented over time as the needs of local governments and their partners evolve in this era of climate change. Learning systems, by their nature, need room to find their way, which is why this system is laid out as a series of elements, relationships, and feedback structures, rather than detailed organizational charts and directives. By getting the basic structure of the system right, and ensuring clear vision, high standards, and accountability, this system of climate services can adapt as needs change.

Next Steps

Climate Ready America will be developed through the following steps.

Phase I: Proof of Concept (2022-23)

- ▶ Develop new and strengthen existing partnerships with national organizations working to build climate resilience that can help develop this system
- ▶ Enlist five states ready to develop CIC pilots
- ▶ Identify what approaches will be tested and how we will measure and report results
- ▶ Secure funding from federal, state, and philanthropic sources for these CIC pilots
- ▶ Establish an anchor agency or cross-agency task force within the Federal government to monitor the pilots and advocate for expansion to other states
- ▶ Recruit experts to serve on a single pilot Regional Support Team that will support the five pilots regardless of their location
- ▶ Implement pilot CICs and a Regional Support Team, including agreed upon measures of success for each

Transition from Pilot to Expansion Phase (2024-2025)

- ▶ Analyze, learn from, and report outcomes from pilots
- ▶ Secure long-term funding
- ▶ Develop CICs in 10 additional states, focusing on regional synergies to transition the pilot support team to an actual Regional Support Team structure
- ▶ Develop additional Regional Support Teams as needed to support the increase in CICs

- ▶ Plan and prioritize remaining states' inclusion into the program based on interest and readiness
- ▶ Design and implement an IT solution to manage the data flows that will be generated
- ▶ Evolve the National Core Team as needed to support the expansion

Complete Expansion to 50 States (2025-2028)

- ▶ Develop CICs in remaining states
- ▶ Determine potential for expansion to US territories
- ▶ Assess all functional infrastructure and services to ensure that the climate resilience needs of communities are being met through the system
- ▶ Dismantle any infrastructure that was necessary to lift the system, but is no longer required to keep the system functioning
- ▶ Assess progress toward global goals

About the Geos Institute

Geos Institute is an Oregon-based nonprofit organization with 14 years of experience helping communities understand changing climate conditions and build resilience. From this work, we developed the Climate Ready Communities program to assist small to mid-sized and under-resourced communities. This program has given our team first-hand knowledge and experience of the severe barriers to climate action present for many communities. Our research into current climate action in all 50 states has confirmed that change is not happening with the speed or the spread required to reach resilience goals (both adaptation and mitigation), by 2030.

Climate Ready America is an ambitious plan borne out of the knowledge that widespread action must be taken within this decade to address the climate crisis. This concept has already benefited from the counsel of community leaders, state level organizations, academic institutions, potential funders, and government agencies. We remain open to feedback, suggestions, and partnerships that will make this system more effective and easier to stand up.

Contact Us

For further information or to discuss any aspect of the Climate Ready America program, please contact: Tonya Graham (tonya@geosinstitute.org) or Kim Adams (kim@geosinstitute.org).

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