Testimony of Roland Lewis, President and CEO
on Climate Change Impacts and Mitigation Measures in New York City

Before the Committee on Environmental Protection on

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Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony. I am Roland Lewis, president of the Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance. The Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance (MWA) is a coalition of over 570 organizations working together to transform the New York Harbor and its waterways into a world class resource for work, play, transit and education.

MWA believes climate change to be one of the greatest challenges facing our region, New York City, and the New York City waterfront. As we know from this summer, much of the New York Metropolitan area dodged a bullet with limited impact and damage from hurricane Irene. The response to hurricane Irene served as a dress rehearsal for the long term challenge of how we deal with climate change and our rising seas. The hurricane was another reminder of the importance of simultaneously preparing for climate change and preventing it.

While the emergency planning and preparedness tools that were rolled out for Irene predate the more recent warnings over sea level rise, these measures reinforced growing concerns over the potential impacts of melting icecaps for our region. Indeed, so many graphics on television and the Internet showed potential flooded areas of Manhattan resembling something from Al Gore’s “Inconvenient Truth.” With the precautionary
evacuations and transit shut downs, and warnings about the dangers of low-lying industrial areas being turned into toxic soup, the media, government and the civic community are recognizing that over time water will breach our shorelines and we must develop procedures, designs and strategies that will adapt to this new reality.

The recent work of the New York City Office of Emergency Management, the Mayor’s Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability and the New York State Sea Level Rise Task Force, along with planning by the Port Authority the MTA and dozens of other private, public and non-profit organizations have infiltrated the public’s consciousness and certainly had some effect on the emergency response planning. Even the design community has gotten into the picture with the recent Rising Currents exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art that creatively re-imagined our region as the water rises. From futuristic architectural renderings of an aquatic urban environment to hard-tack engineering solutions to protect our transportation, communication and other systems, all of this work responds to a warming planet and rising oceans.

While climate change has received attention and planning locally and regionally, an aggressive response at a federal level is still caught in political doldrums. Many political leaders still doubt the reality of a warming planet and its consequences. Estimates vary, but sea level could rise as much as 55 inches by 2080 with rapid ice melts. At a minimum FEMA Flood Insurance Rate Maps should be updated to reflect the latest data related to sea level rise.

Our recent 400th anniversary commemoration of the Dutch visit to New York Harbor brings to mind the water management techniques that have for centuries protected the
Netherlands from the North Sea and from river flooding. Best known for the large protective gates protecting Rotterdam, the Dutch employ a variety of methods small and large to protect against storm surge and sea level rise. New York City and others in the region are following suit. PlaNYC, and the Vision 2020, the new comprehensive plan for the New York City waterfront, call for protection and adaptation in how we design our waterfront. Soft edges that can absorb water, dikes and levees, functioning wetlands, even flood gates and barriers to protect certain channels and property could all be part of New York’s waterfront future.

While New York City is recognized internationally for its work through PlaNYC on research and planning for climate change mitigation and adaptation, there is far to go. During these tough economic times MWA calls for the City’s continued commitment to the Mayor’s Office of Long Term Planning and Sustainability by ensuring the Office is fully funded and all staff positions are filled. Advocacy organization such as the New York League of Conservation, MWA, and others must ensure Mayor Bloomberg’s sustainability agenda is embraced and a central part of the next administration.

MWA calls for commitments to by the State, City, civic, academic, cultural, private, and nonprofit sectors to dedicate significant attention and resources to developing a variety of strategies for responding to climate change and for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. As a City we need a full tool kit for climate change made up of practical and long term strategies. Such a tool kit includes emergency preparedness measures, intelligent and innovative strategies for waterfront edge design, infrastructure protection measures,
energy saving and greenhouse gas reduction measures, strategies to protect our transportation infrastructure, and strategies to involve waterfront communities in planning and preparing for climate change.

Irene’s less-than-anticipated fury was nature’s lenient lesson for those in the New York Metropolitan area. We must figure out what worked and what didn’t in how we protect and prepare this great City for the new future dawning on this planet.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have.