

Flood protection plan for N.Y. Harbor insufficient

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As the world warms and rising oceans threaten the future of the New York-New Jersey metropolitan region, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is conducting the largest study you've never heard about to reduce our risk of flooding — without fully considering flood risk.

Part of a relief package following Superstorm Sandy was an award to the Army Corps of Engineers to formulate a plan — the New York-New Jersey Harbor and Tributaries Study (HATS) — to reduce the area's risk for flooding. The Corps has since developed five alternatives to do just that, ranging from a surge barrier spanning the mouth of the Lower New York Bay, to levees at strategic area shorelines, to doing nothing.

Though it carries a potential price tag of \$119 billion and affects every community in the metropolitan area, you may not have heard about this study. That's because the Corps, working with limited funds allotted for public engagement, has hosted nine public scoping meetings, drawing only a few hundred participants in a region of 16 million.

And, maddeningly, the study fails to look at the whole problem: the fact that the seas are rising inexorably as the planet warms and causing floods unrelated to storms.

The Corps study looks solely at how to reduce risk caused by a large storm. Sea level rise is included in the study merely to gauge how high to build gates and levees. The result is a manufactured bias toward harder measures that offer few other benefits.

There is a better way.

Start with robust public outreach and education about the options and tradeoffs to adapt our region to sea level rise, and allow the Army Corps the flexibility to adjust to local input.

Second, incorporate cutting-edge science and prioritize strategies that reduce flood risk caused by storms and sea level rise.

The States of New York and New Jersey must step up and fulfill their obligations as project partners, and actively seek more input from communities at the frontlines.

Equally important, our state and local officials need to take a public stance when vetting the Army Corps approach. As a region, we need federal funding to tackle the challenge of adaptation, but we need to get it right.

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