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NEW YORK STATE DIRECTS THE CORPS TO SAFEGUARD COMMUNITIES AND THE REGION FROM MORE THAN JUST HURRICANES

New York, NY – Waterfront Alliance joins a broad group of environmental, civic, and environmental justice organizations in celebrating New York State’s action requiring the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to better protect communities and the region from climate change impacts including flooding and other weather-related hazards.

Last week, following years of advocacy by Waterfront Alliance and our partners, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) issued a directive to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that would result in better protections for millions of New York and New Jersey residents. If New York State’s proposal is successful, the $52.6 billion storm surge protection plan will shift the Army Corps of Engineers’ approach from exclusively relying on hurricane protection strategies like walls and barriers, to a more comprehensive method addressing multiple climate change threats, while actively involving communities in the process.

New York State is asking for a mandated procedure under federal legislation, compelling the Corps to conduct comprehensive research and devise strategies to tackle issues such as regular tidal and river flooding, intense rainfalls, emerging groundwater, erosion, sea level rise, and storm surges within the scope of the Corps’ New York-New Jersey Harbor and Tributaries Study. This move aligns with the demands of a bipartisan coalition of 14 Members of Congress and 38 New York State legislators.

Key requirements for the Corps now include:

- Conducting a thorough “multi-hazard” evaluation of projects within the study, accounting for diverse flooding sources, from intense rainfall and groundwater issues to sea level rise, in line with the Water Resources Development Act of 2022 Section 8106.
- Preparing and circulating a Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement for public input, encompassing updated analyses and new or alternative strategies.
- Finalizing a plan following the completion of these steps.
Additionally, NYSDEC has instructed the Corps to:

- Implement a staged, adaptive management strategy, permitting adjustments based on environmental assessments and feedback from communities and stakeholders.
- Progress with distinct project elements as they are prepared, rather than attempting to advance the entire plan collectively.
- Contract an independent firm to lead outreach and engagement activities with environmental justice communities and facilitate regular, meaningful public discussions.

This crucial development ensures that the investment of $52.6 billion, in what would be the nation’s most costly coastal infrastructure project, addresses more than storm surge flooding. Over 50 organizations across New York and New Jersey have campaigned for these vital modifications to the New York-New Jersey Harbor and Tributaries Study plan, stating that the Corps needs to study solutions that mitigate risks from all types of flooding, give priority to protections for environmental justice communities, and incorporate nature-based and non-structural elements as much as possible.

We commend NYSDEC Commissioner, Basil Seggos, for his role in ensuring that the region’s flood analysis is holistic and comprehensive. New York City has also expressed support for this broader approach to hazard assessment and the enhancement of public involvement.

“We are pleased and relieved that New York State has made it clear the Army Corps’ New York-New Jersey Harbor and Tributaries Study (HATS) must be changed and must protect people of New York and New Jersey from the widest range of climate change impacts on and near coastlines. A project of this size – the largest in the country - must incorporate solutions that protect our residents, infrastructure, and natural ecosystems from risks beyond just surges from major storms and hurricanes. Waterfront Alliance and the Rise to Resilience Coalition have long called for meaningful community empowerment and a more adaptive, iterative approach to this study. We are proud of the sustained advocacy of this Coalition and look forward to continuing to work together toward a better plan for the future of our harbor,” said Cortney Koenig Worrall, President and CEO, Waterfront Alliance.

“We applaud New York State in calling for a comprehensive approach to flooding – one that prioritizes sound science and engagement with at-risk communities. By requesting changes to this project, we can minimize inequities and costly damage, as well as help communities build the future they deserve,” said Kate Boicourt, director for Environmental Defense Fund’s Climate Resilient Coasts and Watersheds New York-New Jersey program. “This commitment invokes changes that Environmental Defense Fund, the Rise to Resilience coalition and many partners have fought for in recent years, now setting a precedent for the role environmental, civic and environmental justice advocates can play in future projects.”

“No Army Corps plan can advance without the full buy-in and support from its non-federal sponsors,” said Robert Freudenberg, Vice President for Energy & Environment at Regional Plan Association.
“By requesting critical changes to the plan’s approach in its letter to the Army Corps, one of those sponsors - New York - has signaled its alignment with what advocates have been calling for all along: a plan that addresses multiple flooding hazards, not just storm surge, a phased approach to planning and implementation, and better engagement, particularly with environmental justice communities. This is a significant and meaningful step forward toward a better plan and we applaud New York State for taking it, and urge the Army Corps to proceed with a multi-hazard approach that minimizes the impact of flooding for all communities.”

“Now is the moment to fix the Army Corps plan and get the smart, comprehensive flood protections we truly need for New York and New Jersey. Riverkeeper and our partners across the metropolitan region are united in this call for a more effective and just approach, not the massive sea barriers and walls the Army Corps is proposing,” said Riverkeeper President Tracy Brown. “We applaud New York State DEC for stepping up and insisting on a plan that is better for our communities and better for our environment, as Congress has mandated. At this critical juncture we need to get this right.”

“Logic has prevailed. A one-hazard solution will not propel New York and New Jersey communities forward” said Amy Chester, Managing Director of Rebuild by Design. “Thank you New York State for advocating on behalf of our communities for better, more comprehensive solutions.”

“On behalf of our member organizations, the SWIM Coalition applauds the NYSDEC for supporting our calls for the US Army Corps of Engineers to conduct a more comprehensive, multi-hazard study prior to advancing any work on the NY-NJ Harbor,” said Leonel Lima Ponce, Chair, Steering Committee for the SWIM Coalition. “We have long sought solutions that respond to climate change while also working to improve water quality around NYC. We continue to encourage additional and deep community engagement, inclusive of local waterbody advocates and overburdened waterfront residents.”

“We’re grateful for Commissioner Seggos’ leadership, calling for protections to address numerous damaging flood concerns to protect our homes, communities and beloved parks,” said Lauren Cosgrove, Rockaway resident and Northeast Campaign Director for the National Parks Conservation Association. “The Corps must do better - our way of life depends on the success of this proposal. We need a plan with layers of protection that includes upgraded infrastructure, building retrofits and nature-based solutions, not massive concrete barriers that will make flooding worse.”

“We are past due for large scale investment to protect our city from flooding,” said Willis Elkins, Executive Director of the Newtown Creek Alliance, “but a multi-billion dollar investment needs to address all forms of flood risk and be done so in close conjunction with local communities to properly address their needs and concerns.”

“New York State’s letter requires the Army Corps to prepare a fuller, more inclusive HATS study, in which serious, present-day threats like rain-driven and sunny-day flooding will be put on equal footing with storm surge, and where community expertise will finally get the respect it deserves,” said Paul Gallay
and Victoria Sanders of the Resilient Coastal Communities Project, a partnership between the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance and the Columbia Climate School. “This will be well worth the effort. Indeed, it’s the only way the HATS Study can responsibly address the increasingly serious and complex flood risks facing our communities and ecosystems, while prioritizing protections for environmental justice communities and integrating meaningful partnerships with frontline communities at every step of the way.”

Waterfront Alliance is a U.S. based nonprofit organization with a growing coalition of more than 1,100 partners and shared goal: to bring about real change to shorelines, waterfronts, and coastlines across the nation and in the New York-New Jersey region. Together, we build, transform, revitalize, and protect accessible waterfronts for all communities.