

Policy Recommendations to Address Climate-Forced Displacement in the United States: *The Need for an Equitable and Just Response*

Climate-Forced Displacement Policy Solutions:

INCREASE FUNDING TO PROTECT FRONTLINE

COMMUNITIES

Climate change is ravaging communities nationwide, particularly Indigenous peoples and communities of color, who are at extreme risk of displacement. Yet, federal climate adaptation and disaster relief programs are not designed to assist Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) communities with the greatest need. This disparity is made worse because the government has not developed a coordinated plan—or dedicated proper funding—to support communities who wish to adapt to live safely where they are or relocate out of harm’s way.

Problem

The climate crisis creates high—in many ways incalculable—costs for Indigenous peoples and communities of color. As a baseline, developing and implementing preventative climate change adaptation measures to protect existing infrastructure in Tribal communities in Alaska and the contiguous United States over the next 50 years is estimated to cost at least \$6 billion.¹ Even this amount—which covers only existing infrastructure, not future relocation or expansion needs—is likely significantly underestimated due to the lack of community-specific risk assessments.

Recommendations²

Congress should increase funding to relevant federal programs and create more programs that specifically target the special needs and unique vulnerabilities of frontline communities. Executive agencies should identify and address barriers faced by frontline communities in accessing current resources to help them build their resiliency and adapt in place. Examples of existing federal programs that should be strengthened include the Bureau of Indian Affairs Tribal Resilience Program and the Housing and Urban Development’s Indian Community Development Block Grant (ICDBG) and the ICDBG Imminent Threat Program. Examples of programs that need significant improvements in order to be effective for affected communities include at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program and the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program; Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) programs; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) programs; and the US Army Corps of Engineers programs.

The government should make it easier for community-based organizations and Tribal Nations to access resources—especially those that serve historically disenfranchised communities—by practicing affirmative outreach to communities in appropriate languages and making public information about funding programs more understandable and accessible. This may mean sharing information about federal funding programs

through radio, mail, and social media in addition to posting to websites. The government should ensure that communities understand what they need to do to access funding and that information reaches communities well within the projected funding deadlines. Other important ways of making funding accessible include removing the cost-sharing burden for federal programs; providing alternatives to the standard cost-benefit methodology; streamlining federal applications; relaxing reporting requirements; expanding eligibility to encompass communities as a whole and those who do not own land or property, such as renters; resourcing the infrastructure needs of climate-affected communities, including reliable access to affordable water, power, and broadband internet; and providing long-term technical assistance to support communities in applying to federal grant programs. The government should provide funds based on social and economic need and eliminate competition-based grant programs that pit communities with few resources against those with significantly more.³

¹ATNI [Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians]. (2020). (Internal report) *American Indian Communities in the Contiguous United States: Unmet infrastructure needs and the recommended pathway to address a fundamental threat to lives, livelihoods, and cultures*; DOI Bureau of Indian Affairs Office of Trust Services Tribal Resilience Program (2020), *Report on the unmet infrastructure needs of Tribal communities and Alaska Native villages in process of relocating to higher ground as a result of climate change*. Submitted to the Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies Committee on Appropriations, US House of Representatives (May 2020). 16 pp.

²These recent executive orders provide room to address these recommendations: EO 14008: Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad; EO 13990: Protecting Public Health and the Environment and Restoring Science to Tackle the Climate Crisis; EO 13985: Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government.

³<http://assets.bwbx.io/documents/users/iqjWHBFdfxIU/rqCoiOj.HYkQ/v0>

