



**RISE TO
RESILIENCE**

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Cc:

Eileen Murphy, Director, Congressional and Federal Affairs, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation

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RE: State and Local Leadership on Increased Public Engagement to Finalize the New York New Jersey Harbor and Tributaries Study (NYNJHATS)

Overview

The Rise to Resilience coalition and members of Congress advocated for language to expand the authorization of the New York New Jersey Harbor and Tributaries Study (NYNJHATS) and that was successfully included in the Water Resources Development Act of 2020 (WRDA 2020), reiterated in a [letter](#) to the States of New York and New Jersey and City of New York on October 15, 2021, recognizing the need for several priority modifications to the study and its development, including a:

1. **Robust public engagement process to facilitate collaborative project planning**
2. **Multi-hazard and phased approach**
3. **Holistic lens of racial, economic, and ecological impact and equity**
4. **Increased consideration of nonstructural, natural, and nature-based solutions**

Building from conversations with the non-federal sponsors, we urge you to consider the following **recommended strategy to advance the first priority, a robust public**



The logo for Rise to Resilience consists of the words "RISE TO RESILIENCE" in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. A thin vertical blue line is positioned to the left of the text.

engagement process, which will lead to more effective partnership between the community and government on resilience project design. We look forward to discussing how we might partner with the state to support a more just and equitable engagement strategy to inform the resulting plan.

Dedicate Resources

The USACE is limited in its capacity to support meaningful public engagement necessary to developing a publicly supported plan. To date, the onus has been on USACE internal staff to conduct this engagement through public meetings, despite the agency's limited resources to conduct this work. The States of New Jersey and New York and City of New York are much better positioned to conduct outreach and drive input into the study and plan development. We therefore urge you to first dedicate the following public engagement resources to ensure that the study direction is responsive to the residents of the region, especially those most affected, ideally in partnership with the other non-federal sponsors and the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE):

1. Respectively allocate fully dedicated New York State, New Jersey, and New York City resilience public engagement ombudspersons in multiple communities to manage the public engagement process in partnership with the US Army Corps of Engineers in 2022-2023.
2. Dedicate a budget to provide grants to compensate community partners for convening meetings
3. Hire an external facilitator to organize and facilitate community feedback and outreach, and compile reports.
4. Dedicate resources to fully fund robust non-meeting based outreach methods and non-traditional meeting based methods as described below.

Conduct an Iterative Process

Public engagement for NYNJHATS thus far has been very limited. In a region of 16 million residents, engagement methods to get to the Interim report phase relied solely on nine



public workshops, reaching a total of 705 attendees. For this reason alone, there is a need to better engage communities before informing a selected plan.

Further, since the interim report and subsequent halting of the study, changes have been made to USACE policy through executive and congressional action. This includes key elements advocated for by the Rise to Resilience coalition including the Water Resources Development Act of 2020's section 203 that directed increased engagement with affected communities and a [January 5, 2021 policy directive](#) from the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works which directs a more comprehensive and holistic approach to evaluating project benefits. We therefore think it is extremely important to expand the public engagement period to encompass a more iterative process. Only through a better process can projects be more effectively co-designed with the community.

Extend Public Comment Periods

We call for adjusting and extending the timeline of the public engagement windows to create a more iterative and fruitful public engagement process.

Proposed changes to the NYNJHATS plan timeline to increase public input



Make Engagement Accessible

To ensure that communities most affected by the study are informing the direction, USACE and non-federal sponsors must increase engagement with, and empowerment of, the public - especially frontline communities. Working in partnership with communities leads to better-



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informed, better-designed decisions with greater buy-in. To ensure that more residents are engaged in the decision-making process, we urge the state to go beyond traditional meetings for gathering input. Specifically:

- Provide an array of opportunities to engage including virtual, online and in-person surveys, multiple in person locations, email, and paper mail.
- As soon as possible, identify and pursue a list of local organizations across the region to partner in hosting online input resources, holding or joining existing community meetings and events at accessible public locations, as well as compensating partner organizations for their time and meeting resources (e.g., translation, childcare, food). We are happy to, as a coalition, assist you in the development of this list.
- Provide options for greatest engagement including morning, afternoon, evening and weekends.
- Promote meetings and online resources on social media and via flyers at public locations including libraries, recreation centers, schools, local businesses, parks, etc. Communications should also be included via email, digital newsletters, NGO networks, neighborhood association boards, county listservs, local news outlets, etc.
- Translate all materials into secondary and tertiary languages relevant to the area.
- Provide a subject matter expert to answer any questions at each meeting.
- Online resources and presentations should include:
 - An overview of the study and potential outcomes,
 - Draft tentatively selected plan, with clear and accessible definitions and visualizations of the types of solutions proposed in the different alternatives,
 - Questions to elucidate public values, prioritizing those of frontline and affected communities, that could inform decision-making,
 - A succinct overview of “what we heard, and what changed” compared to previous iterations of the alternatives
 - Sufficient time for dialogue and planning development between community stakeholders and agency professionals.

We would be pleased as a coalition to work with the other non-federal sponsors, and the US Army Corps of Engineers to advance this strategy, beginning with identifying a list of potential community engagement partners; sharing and publicizing information; convening



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public consultation sessions; and other ways that are helpful in facilitating stronger overall public engagement processes.