

**COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER, OCEANS, AND WILDLIFE  
REMOTE OVERSIGHT HEARING**

**October 15, 2020**

**2:00 P.M. EDT**

**Oversight Hearing on “Environmental Justice for Coastal Communities: Examining  
Inequities in Federal Grantmaking.”**

**Rep. Jared Huffman Opening Statement**

Good afternoon and thank you for joining us for the Water, Oceans, and Wildlife subcommittee oversight hearing on environmental justice issues within the Federal grantmaking process.

Our country has gone through a massive reckoning with structural racism this year, and we recognized it was past time to examine the laws, programs, and grants within this subcommittee’s jurisdiction for systemic racism. We need to ensure just, equitable opportunities for all individuals and communities.

For today’s hearing, we are specifically looking at NOAA’s grants and programs that help build resilient ecosystems and communities. We’ll use this hearing to discuss potential improvements to ensure that all communities have access to this support. This is especially critical because so many Americans are experiencing unprecedented changes on our nation’s coasts due to climate change.

2020 has been yet another historic year for hurricanes and coastal storms, which scientists tell us will become more frequent and intense. Sea level rise and the loss of coastal elevation are causing more frequent chronic flooding issues, resulting in damage to homes and businesses and preventing people from getting to work and school. Nutrient run-off and changing ocean conditions are severely degrading coastal ecosystems such as salt marshes and seagrass beds, which protect coastal communities and their economies. And ocean heat waves are having devastating impacts on fisheries and important coastal ecosystems, including our kelp forests on the west coast.

As state and local budgets have been hit hard by the pandemic, many states are being forced to gut their coastal resiliency budgets. Federal support for programs that restore and protect our coastlines and ecosystems is especially important now. Unfortunately, many Federal grants go to wealthier communities while under-resourced communities that often need the assistance most are overlooked or ineligible. For example, after Superstorm Sandy, wealthier neighborhoods got more and faster assistance than their less affluent neighbors, so people could move back home and their economies were able to bounce back quicker.

Over the past two years as this subcommittee has examined legislation, we’ve heard from many stakeholders about the barriers that under-resourced communities face in getting the federal assistance they need. Sometimes a community can’t afford to employ a project planning team that could get technical ideas to a competitive place for grants. Other times, communities can’t pull together enough non-federal matching funds for a project – which are very often a requirement -

rendering them ineligible. And in some cases, certain communities are simply ineligible for programs. We heard about this last year when President Fawn Sharp, one of our witnesses here today, testified before our committee about the need for expanding eligibility for coastal zone management grants to Tribes.

The historical purpose of matching fund requirements is to help ensure local or state-level buy-in for projects and to help leverage additional sources of funding. For example, one of the most important and a popular program in our Committee, the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, requires a one-to-one match for wetland conservation projects. That program has leveraged over \$3.5 billion in non-federal money for critical wetland conservation and coastal protection across our country - something that its supporters are and should be proud of. Unfortunately, those matching fund requirements can also prohibit good projects from getting funds if a community, State, Territory, or Tribe can't come up with a non-federal match. As we prepared for this hearing, we heard many stories of applicants giving up on their grant applications when matching fund requirements would have been prohibitive for them.

I hope this discussion today will help us sort out how to maximize buy-in from States and organizations for these important projects while also addressing the barriers for under-resourced communities or grassroots organizations to compete for those funds.

Some of the top barriers faced by communities are the lack of funding for analyzing climate impacts to communities, and developing and carrying out plans for coastal adaptation. Many of the programs under our jurisdiction can help build out technical assistance and fund analyses and project planning, but we need to be sure that all communities are eligible and have access, not just the most affluent. I look forward to exploring this topic so that communities most in need of assistance are getting the technical and financial help they need to adequately prepare for the impacts of climate change.

I believe these and other barriers to equity in climate resilience are things we can address through careful and smart legislation, and I am so grateful to our witnesses for participating in this hearing today and sharing their background and expertise. We have a lot to learn from each of you and I look forward to a constructive dialogue.