

Less Shelter from the Storm

Wisconsin Environment's Analysis of How Federal Budget Proposals put Wisconsin at Risk September 20, 2017

With recent massive hurricanes pummeling our coasts, we need to do more to protect our communities. We need to make them less susceptible to flooding, sewage overflows and leaks from toxic waste sites, and, of course, we need to prevent even more intense global warming fueled extreme weather in the future. Unfortunately, as detailed below, pending budget proposals from the Trump administration and Congress threaten key programs that protect our communities. Rather than protecting our most vulnerable communities, budget proposals on the table in Washington, D.C. right now would threaten coastal resiliency, remove protections for flood-absorbing wetlands, neglect funding for stormwater and sewage treatment, and expose more Americans to toxic chemicals. While we do everything in our power to cut the pollution that will fuel even more extreme weather in the future, we need a budget that supports programs that can shelter us from the coming storms.

Wisconsin Environment analyzed the FY 2018 budget proposed by President Trump in the spring of 2017 and the current House and Senate appropriations bills and their impact on programs that protect communities from storm-related impacts. Overall, the Trump administration proposes a 31% (\$2.6 billion) budget decrease for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) -- the primary agency for protecting the air we breathe and the water we drink, and reducing our exposure to toxic chemicals. The administration's proposal also specifically proposed eliminating or cutting important clean water, coastal protection and slashing toxic waste cleanup programs. To date, the House has also proposed steep but slightly smaller cuts to the EPA of \$528 million. The House spending bills also include several harmful legislative "riders," including one that targets the Clean Water Rule, which protects flood-absorbing wetlands. The House bill also cuts important coastal protection programs and initially slashed clean water grants to states. Wisconsin Environment is calling on U.S. Senators Tammy Baldwin and Ron Johnson to protect Wisconsinites by fully funding important programs that protect our communities and opposing these and any other harmful proposals.

Protect Flood-Absorbing Wetlands

Floods are the most common natural disaster in the US, and scientists predict that the damage caused by floods will only increase in the years to come, to over \$1 trillion per year by 2050 globally¹. As climate change continues to progress, extreme rain events that trigger flooding are likely to become increasingly frequent. In a warming world where extreme precipitation events

¹ Stephane Hallegatte et al, "Future Flood Losses in Major Coastal Cities," Nature Climate Change, doi: 10/1038/NCLIMATE1979, 18 August 2013.

will be more common, we need to protect critical natural flood barriers so that communities are safer from flooding and extreme precipitation events.

Wetlands are Nature's Flood Control, but the House Budget Threatens Their Protection

During times of heavy precipitation, wetlands act like a sponge to slow the velocity of runoff and retain excess water. In fact, an acre of wetland 1 foot deep can hold 330,000 gallons of water. In this way, wetlands reduce the danger of flooding and mitigate its worst impacts, providing water flow regulation services to communities across the US.

According to data from the National Wetlands Inventory, Wisconsin boasts 5.4 million acres of freshwater wetlands statewide. Approximately 1.4 million acres of the state's freshwater wetlands lie in the 100-year-flood zones (flooding with a probability of occurring once every 100 years) for which flood hazard data is available from FEMA.

In Dane County, the scene of damaging floods in 2008, there are approximately 49,000 acres of freshwater wetlands, of which approximately 32,500 acres are located in 100-year-flood zones. Together, these wetlands are capable of holding more than 16 billion gallons of water.

The Wisconsin Flood of 2008 struck vast stretches of the Midwest, including southern Wisconsin, in June 2008. After a winter of heavy snowfall and saturated soil, heavy rain on June 7 and 8 caused streams and lakes to rise. In Dane County, heavy rainfall caused Lake Mendota and Lake Monona to rise to their 100-year flood levels. Just north of Dane County, the storm caused a dam to collapse and Lake Delton to drain, washing away homes and a highway and threatening nearby residents in the town of Gay Mills. After the flooding, 31 counties in Wisconsin were declared federal disaster areas. In Dane County, 1,635 people applied for federal assistance and received a total of \$1.8 million in disaster relief.

Dane County is home to the state capital, the main campus of the University of Wisconsin and many acres of farmland. More than half of Dane County falls within the Rock River Basin and the Crawfish River Basin. Paving over or otherwise destroying wetlands reduces the ability of the landscape to absorb rainfall from extreme precipitation events, which can exacerbate flooding and its impacts on the county's communities.²

Wetlands are important natural flood protections, and millions of acres of wetlands are protected by the Clean Water Rule, which restored full protections to thousands of wetlands and streams across the country. However, the Trump administration and some of Congress want to repeal the Clean Water Rule, which, in addition to protecting critical wetlands, protects the drinking water of one in three Americans, including 392,000 Wisconsinites. Now, the House budget bill

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http://www.environmentamerica.org/sites/environment/files/reports/ShelterfromtheStorm_EnvAmerica_Final.pdf

has provisions that would cut the public out of the repeal process, making it easier for President Trump to dismantle this important protection.

We should be doing everything we can to protect our wetlands, nature's best defense against flooding, but the current administration and the House budget bill would derail clean water protections and leave critical wetland ecosystems more vulnerable to pollution and degradation. We shouldn't be reducing the number of wetlands protected by our nation's bedrock environmental laws. Instead, we need to protect our wetlands and protect our communities from flooding and extreme weather.

Make Our Coasts and Shorelines More Resilient

As the climate changes, our coastal communities will face more extreme weather events and increased dangers due to sea level rise. We need to help communities adapt to these coming changes by funding resiliency programs and making sure we have the best information on weather patterns and possible threats.

Coastal and Shoreline Resiliency is Key

With recent mega-storms showing the importance of protecting and creating more resilient coastlines, it's disappointing to see budget proposals from the Trump administration and Congress that threaten coastal communities.

As our climate changes, our coastal communities will need to adapt to more intense storms and changing ecosystems, and state governments need to help coordinate their response. That's why Coastal Zone Management Grants are so important--they provide a vital source of funding for states who are working with coastal communities to protect our coasts and beaches. The Trump budget would eliminate this funding, reducing the money states have to respond to the needs of coastal communities.

In Wisconsin, NOAA recommended \$2.29 million in Coastal Zone Management Grants to support Wisconsin's coastal management in 2017. The Trump Budget planned on eliminating this program, and it would see cuts under the House's budget as well--they propose to cut the Coastal Zone Management grants program from \$70 million to \$45 million--a 35% cut.

Regional Coastal Resilience Grants provide our coastal communities with the funding they need to tackle the threat of climate change. These grants go to communities and regions that have identified gaps in their defense against storms and rising oceans and are working together with state agencies and private organizations to address hazards and problems on their coasts. By providing funding for these grants, the Federal government is empowering local decision-makers and unlocking additional resources to protect coastal communities.

In 2017 thanks to Regional Coastal Resilience Grants, NOAA recommended that Wisconsin receive \$840,000 for projects that will help our coastal communities prepare for coastal storms

and changes due to sea level rise and restore vital coastal habitat. Specifically, Southeastern Wisconsin wants to reduce damages caused by coastal hazards, such as erosion, coastal storms, and fluctuating water levels. For this project, guidance will be developed with regard to options for protecting bluff, beach, and harbor ecosystems and the coastal economy. Exploring future possibilities through scenario development and improving risk communication are also parts of the effort. The Wisconsin Department of Administration's Wisconsin Coastal Management Program is leading this project, and participation involves four coastal counties, 22 coastal municipalities, and various state and local organizations.

Both the Trump administration and the House propose eliminating these grants entirely, harming the ability of Wisconsin's coastal communities to prepare themselves for future storms.

Research to help us prepare

As weather patterns and sea levels change, it will be more important than ever to have our best minds working to understand and document new changes, so policy makers and local communities can get the information they need to protect themselves.

That's why it's so troubling that the Trump budget proposes a \$139 million cut to NOAA's Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research. This office is responsible for financing cutting edge research into our changing climate through its competitively funded climate research, which works with universities, labs, and institutes to better understand our climate. Trump would cut this program by \$31 million. The office also oversees NOAA's weather and air chemistry research, leaving us less prepared to predict the weather and the aftereffects of air pollution.³

Under the Trump budget, the federal Sea Grant program, which provides support to oceanic research institutes and ocean departments at partner universities that work to better understand our oceans and better manage our coastal resources, would be eliminated. This would halt the critical research into coastal resilience and our changing oceans conducted by these universities and institutes that will make sure we have the best tools to protect our communities from the changing climate.

In Wisconsin alone, \$1,789,000 will be cut, cutting off funds to institutes researching how our coasts can best adapt to changing oceans and climates.

Improve and Repair our Wastewater and Sewage Infrastructure

The Budget Proposals Mean More Sewage Overflows and Runoff Pollution

The Clean Water State Revolving Fund helps prevent sewage overflows and runoff pollution, both of which are exacerbated by heavy storms and rains. Adequate wastewater infrastructure plays a vital role in the health of streams, rivers, and lakes, where discharged wastewater and stormwater often end up. Wastewater infrastructure must also become more resilient to the

³ http://www.corporateservices.noaa.gov/nbo/fy18_bluebook/FY18-BlueBook.pdf

impacts of climate change, including sea level rise, stronger and more frequent storms, flooding, and drought.

In the aftermath of Harvey, we are already seeing reports of sewage contamination in the water flooding citizen's homes. People are getting sick, and it's because our wastewater and sewage infrastructure wasn't ready⁴.

The Clean Water State Revolving Fund helps improve infrastructure resilience against extreme weather events. Since its inception in 1987, the Clean Water State Revolving Fund has provided more than \$111 billion in low-interest loans and subsidies. In 2016, Wisconsin received \$36.1 million through this program to repair and upgrade wastewater systems, manage contaminated urban runoff, and upgrade treatment facilities. The program provides affordable financing to thousands of communities to upgrade and repair wastewater treatment plants, correct combined and sanitary sewer overflows, and protect waterbodies from nonpoint sources of pollution at a much lower cost than possible through conventional financing.

Unfortunately, this program is not adequately funded. We are already facing a maintenance backlog in our wastewater systems, and this problem will only become more pressing. An EPA survey⁵ estimated that \$271 billion is needed over the next 20 years to maintain and improve the nation's wastewater infrastructure, including pipes that carry wastewater to treatment plants, the technology that treats the water, and methods for managing stormwater runoff. Most of that \$271 billion investment is needed for projects in the next 5 years.

However, despite the desperate need across the country for these critical repairs and upgrades, the Trump administration keeps the program funded at current inadequate levels and the initial House budget actually proposed cutting funding for the Clean Water State Revolving Fund by \$250 million. This cut was later reversed by an amendment on the House floor.

Instead of shortchanging a program that helps states and communities protect their waterways and become more resilient to the impacts of climate change, we should have a budget that protects and expands the Clean Water State Revolving Fund and providing funds for communities to build up their resilience.

Keep Us Safe from Toxic Wastes

The Superfund program was established in the 1980's by the EPA in the aftermath of several environmental crises, such as the Love Canal disaster in New York that forced hundreds of people to relocate from exposure to dangerous chemical pollution. The Superfund program is

⁴ https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/11/health/houston-flood-contamination.html?_r=1

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<https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epa-survey-shows-271-billion-needed-nations-wastewater-infrastructure>

currently tasked with cleaning up more than 1,300 of the most toxic wastes sites⁶ in the country and responding to environmental catastrophes and natural disasters.

One in four Americans, including over 10 million children, live within 3 miles of a Superfund site⁷. In Wisconsin, there are 55 Superfund sites that are registered on the National Priority List and warrant further investigation and long-term cleanup. Since the program was founded, over 394 sites have been cleaned up and delisted⁸.

The Superfund program facilitates natural disaster response in two ways. First, the Superfund program provides training for thousands of first responders (firefighters, police, emergency room nurses, etc.) so they can protect the public and themselves by detecting and identifying hazardous substances. This training is an essential element of emergency and disaster response capabilities. Second, the Superfund program provides the expertise and financial resources to conduct emergency and long-term response actions that protect the public from hazardous substances.

A 2012 EPA assessment found that more than 500 Superfund sites were located in flood zones, 50 of which were based in coastal areas susceptible to sea level rise⁹. In the last month, Hurricane Harvey flooded 13 Superfund sites¹⁰ and left citizens in Houston wading through toxic water. With climate change expected to intensify storms like Hurricane Harvey in the future, reinforcing the Superfund program will become more critical than ever to keep our communities safe from harmful toxins.

Unfortunately, The Trump administration has proposed to cut the Superfund program by \$330 million, nearly 30% of its previous budget.¹¹ However, the House has proposed to increase the level of funding for the Superfund program as a whole by \$27.6 million.

Now, more than ever, is it essential that we fully fund toxic waste cleanups, not slash their budgets. Reduced funding levels for the Superfund program has already prompted the EPA to delay approximately one-third of new projects that were scheduled.¹² These drastic funding cuts would further backlog the cleanup of these sites, posing a significant risk to our families.

⁶ <https://www.epa.gov/superfund/national-priorities-list-npl-sites-state>

⁷ <http://www.uspirg.org/reports/usp/empty-pockets>

⁸ <https://www.epa.gov/superfund/deleted-national-priorities-list-npl-sites-state>

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2017/09/09/us/ap-us-hurricane-irma-toxic-sites.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/status-superfund-sites-areas-affected-harvey>

¹¹ <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BUDGET-2018-MSV/pdf/BUDGET-2018-MSV.pdf>

¹² <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-15-812>