



April 16, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Leaders McConnell, Schumer and McCarthy:

As all Americans struggle to meet the challenges presented by the COVID-19 virus, we write to you with public interest-oriented recommendations that would both enhance our nation's response to the pandemic and enable us to emerge from this crisis stronger. On behalf of our hundreds of thousands of members across the country, we urge you to include these policies in upcoming coronavirus legislation.

In this letter, we highlight immediate steps to bolster the nation's response to the novel coronavirus, and suggest longer-term recommendations for Congress to consider in any upcoming stimulus packages. We must prioritize:

- **Public health** — ensuring the availability of testing and medical supplies, among other priorities.
- **Democracy** — making elections safe and improving the oversight and transparency of the government's unprecedented transfer of trillions of dollars.
- **Consumer, small business and student protections** — stopping predatory lending and other unfair financial practices.
- **Infrastructure** — investing in projects that both re-start the economy and protect and preserve the environment.

The following provides details.

Public health:

In any bill to properly address the COVID-19 pandemic, public health considerations should be first and foremost.

COVID-19 Testing

We need to expand testing capacity and expedite the test processing. To slow the spread of the virus, reliable testing and rapid test processing must be available for anyone who shows symptoms of COVID-19, as well as for health care workers and others who may have been

exposed to coronavirus. Serological testing for antibodies to COVID-19 must be made available for anyone who suspects past transmission. To achieve these ends, Congress should use its authority to guarantee that the administration is effectively using all of the tools at its disposal. These include:

- Invoking the Defense Production Act to dramatically increase the quantity of available tests and supplies.
- Ensuring the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) [sets a clear standard of quality for tests](#) and uses its emergency authority to approve tests.
- Expanding the number of private and public labs authorized to conduct tests and increasing drive-through testing and home testing options.
- Securing ongoing testing capacity via comprehensive planning.
- Engaging in planning and making purchasing commitments for adequate testing capacity now and for the future.

We must also set up a system to collect high-quality data and identify small pockets of infection before they multiply into larger outbreaks. Too much of the U.S. response to coronavirus to date has been piecemeal, on a state-by-state or county-by-county basis. The federal government exists in part for moments such as this, when national coordination is the only way to tackle a crisis.

Medical Supplies

We need to centrally coordinate the purchase and distribution of medical supplies. In recent days, the president has taken some action to increase federal involvement with allocation and production of medical equipment, including through the creation of a Supply Chain Stabilization Task Force within the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The FEMA task force, however, has laid out a mission that focuses on facilitating private sector operations, rather than taking charge of the national supply chain.

The federal government should immediately establish a “medical equipment czar” and an associated task force with the mission of overseeing the national supply and distribution of medical supplies. They should do this for the duration of the COVID-19 crisis to maximize the health and well-being of the entire U.S. population. Working in close coordination with the Defense Logistics Agency on logistics and national distribution, the task force must be given the resources and authority to:

- Forecast the geographic and temporal spread of COVID-19 in order to anticipate equipment and supply needs and to plan distribution.
- Inventory and monitor the supply of medical equipment.
- Ensure adequate production and procurement of equipment, working with the Trump administration to utilize the Defense Production Act to expand production of essential equipment.
- Oversee the purchase and end-to-end distribution of medical equipment.
- Monitor and respond directly to all equipment requests from states, local governments and/or medical providers.
- Undertake any and all additional actions necessary to achieve its stated mission.

Czar/task force actions may include making recommendations to Congress or the president concerning short-term regulatory changes to increase flexibility for manufacturing or use of medical equipment.

The described czar/task force must undertake its mission with full transparency by:

- Releasing detailed plans for its organizational structure and resource needs and allocation.
- Providing state and local governments with any information they need to coordinate response efforts.
- Offering frequent updates throughout the course of the COVID-19 crisis detailing its efforts. Updates should include communications on any barriers such as funding shortfalls that prevent it from carrying out its mission, so that they may be remedied.

Democracy:

Vote by Mail

Americans should not have to choose between protecting their health and exercising their right to vote. Even in the midst of a pandemic, states need money now to prepare for safe elections in November. Congress should allocate \$1.6 billion for states to implement critical election resilience infrastructure measures, including emergency vote-by-mail, online voter registration, ballot tracking systems, ballot counting systems, signature verification systems, expanded early voting, and cure protocols.

Oversight for Stimulus Money

We support efforts included in the CARES Act (PL 116-136) to oversee the dispersal of hundreds of billions of dollars to private firms. In light of the president's [actions](#) to block the American people from knowing how taxpayer dollars will be spent, the new Select Committee will be all the more important in making sure spending information sees the light of the day. Congress must take all additional actions it can to safeguard the integrity of how this money is spent. This includes providing full funding and oversight powers to the Select Committee announced by the speaker to oversee pandemic response and administration actions.

In the interest of transparency, all money lent and spent must be disclosed online where Americans can see it. If other entities charged with disclosing spending information online to the public fail to do so, Congress should act to ensure the public gets access to the information. All of the information regarding the bailout funding, in particular, must be hosted on a single website, rather than multiple web portals. The information should be comprehensive. All recipient companies should be explicitly named, and the exact amount of money they receive should be disclosed—no exceptions. All information should be user-friendly, understandable and updated in real-time so citizens, watchdogs and elected officials alike can find answers to their questions.

Consumer Protections:

No Negative Credit Reporting

Millions of consumers have lost jobs and will need to choose between paying credit card bills or feeding their families. Worse, the credit reporting bureaus are currently treating any delinquencies caused by loss of income due to this global crisis the same as those resulting from poor financial management. The solution is for Congress to prohibit all negative credit reporting for the duration of the pandemic and for a reasonable recovery period afterwards. The Financial Services Committee has introduced the Financial Protections and Assistance for America's

Consumers, States, Businesses, and Vulnerable Populations Act (H.R. 6321). This comprehensive legislation includes Rep. Brad Sherman's [Disaster Protection For Workers' Credit Act](#) under Section 112. Sens. Brian Schatz and Sherrod Brown have similarly introduced the Disaster Protection for Workers' Credit Act (S.3508).

Cap Payday Loan and Other Interest Rates

Congress should also provide payday loan and interest rate protections. High-cost payday, car title and installment lenders, who promise "fast cash" for consumers and small businesses, stand to profit as millions of Americans—many of whom were already living paycheck to paycheck—struggle to make ends meet over the coming months. Rather than offering a lifeline, these loans will trap borrowers in high-interest debt that will ultimately slow our economic recovery. Congress should cap interest rates on consumer loans at 36 percent APR for the duration of the public health emergency, as [proposed](#) by Sens. Chris Van Hollen and Sherrod Brown.

Other Necessary Consumer Protection Efforts

Further, the federal government must expand other financial protections. For the duration of the pandemic and for a reasonable recovery period, Congress should:

- Expand protections against foreclosures and evictions to all consumers.
- Restrict debt collections, utility shutoffs, vehicle repossessions and garnishments.
- Eliminate overdraft and other penalty fees.
- Take other actions necessary to protect consumers from unfair financial practices.

Student Protections

In the CARES Act, Congress waived interest and payments for federally held student loans through Sept. 30. However, this leaves 9 million student loan borrowers with private loans and with certain kinds of federally backed but privately held loans in the cold. Congress should correct this oversight in the next stimulus package and grant these benefits to all borrowers.

Also in the CARES Act, Congress ended wage garnishment and other penalties against defaulted student borrowers. Unfortunately, these heavy penalties will return after the pandemic ends. Congress should direct the Department of Education to cancel defaulted student loans as a stimulus measure, and allow those borrowers to fully participate in our economy without going through the current onerous process to lift this burden. And, upon moving out of the pandemic, Congress should allow future borrowers to discharge their defaulted student loans in bankruptcy.

Infrastructure:

As Congress considers measures to stimulate the economy in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, there is an opportunity to invest in rebuilding and strengthening critical infrastructure around the country. The following investments are important for our nation's environment and quality of life. As such, they should be prioritized in any future packages intended to stimulate the American economy.

Clean Water

Ensuring safe drinking water is a vital public health imperative under any circumstance. But with the current pandemic, clean water takes on additional importance as Americans are relying

on it to wash their hands more often as part of protocols to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The pipes that deliver water to our homes must be safe. In addition, we must halt the flow of pathogens from stormwater runoff and sewage overflows that also threaten our health. We should address these public health needs by investing in clean water and drinking water infrastructure without delay.

Sewage overflows and runoff pollution present public health risks and environmental damage. Congress should invest \$6 billion per year in wastewater infrastructure grants to halt this pollution. This can be done primarily through the Clean Water State Revolving Fund. As much as possible, Congress should designate this funding as grants rather than loans. In addition, at least 20 percent of those funds should be prioritized for green and natural infrastructure projects through the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) Green Project Reserve.

Lead in drinking water continues to be a problem well beyond Flint, Mich., as [documented](#) by test results from communities across the country. Congress should invest \$4.5 billion per year in drinking water infrastructure grants to fund full lead service line replacement. The grants should also be used to provide point-of-use filters in all homes and childcare centers that have lead service lines. This can be done through the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund or a separate grant program. Since children are particularly vulnerable to lead poisoning, Congress should invest \$1 billion over five years into either the Department of Education or EPA budget to help schools replace lead-bearing water fountains and faucets with water hydration stations with certified filters.

Conserving and reusing water is now more important than ever. Congress should invest in repairing leaking pipes that unnecessarily waste clean water. Congress can further support conservation and reuse by:

- Promoting water-saving practices such as microirrigation in agriculture.
- Encouraging residential xeriscaping options.
- Incentivizing water-saving technologies for businesses.

Transportation

To stave off the worst impacts of global warming, we need to tackle what is now the nation's largest emitter of greenhouse gases (GHGs)—our transportation system. We use massive amounts of fossil fuels to move people and goods around the country and the world. That needs to change. We have the technology to replace this dirty system with clean electric cars, trucks and buses powered by the sun and the wind.

Unfortunately, the electric vehicle (EV) industry is expected to be [hit extremely hard](#) by the COVID-19 crisis. Experts [predict](#) that auto sales will be down more than 30 percent this year. As an emerging part of the larger automotive market, EV sales will likely be hit particularly hard. Recent fuel economy and GHG emissions standards rollbacks have compounded the challenges of the EV sector.

Since widespread EV adoption is not possible without adequate charging infrastructure, Congress should invest right now in 21st-century transportation solutions by funding EV charging infrastructure. Just as gas stations were ubiquitous in the 20th century, EV charging infrastructure should be now. In places where electricity supply is low, solar-powered chargers can be installed. Congress should dedicate funding to building out state and regional EV

charging networks and corridors, including rest stops and park-and-rides. Clear and standardized directional signs should mark the way to electric vehicle charging stations.

Congress can spur significant progress in EV adoption by investing in electric buses. We should increase funding for programs that convert diesel bus fleets to all-electric. Congress should invest \$400 million in municipal buses by funding the Federal Transit Administration's Low or No Emission Vehicle Program, which helps transit agencies looking to adopt electric buses and install infrastructure. We should invest an additional \$200 million for school buses through a new Clean School Bus Grant Program in the Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy at the Department of Energy. This proposal has already been made in Sen. Kamala Harris' Clean School Bus Act (S.1750).

In addition to investments in EVs, we need to emphasize pedestrian, cyclist and transit infrastructure. Highway projects should be required to include improvements to pedestrian and cyclist infrastructure and expand access to transit connections. New road projects should include sidewalks improvement and protected bike lanes. Transit facilities should be pedestrian- and cyclist-accessible.

Repairs to existing roadways are needed, and should be prioritized, but [we need to halt the expansion of new highway capacity](#). Highway expansion fuels additional driving that not only contributes to air pollution and climate change but also doesn't solve congestion and is expensive. Highway expansion can also cause irreparable harm to communities. It forces the relocation of homes and businesses, widens "dead zones" along highways, severs street connections for pedestrians and cars, and reduces a city's taxable property base.

We should also tie highway funding to [GHG emissions and vehicle-miles traveled \(VMT\) reduction goals](#). This will require states to consider GHG and VMT reduction in project decision-making in a way that most states currently do not do. To reduce VMT and GHG, states would likely have to employ a variety of strategies, including better transportation options and smarter land use. These strategies come with a host of benefits besides reducing GHG. They include reduced congestion, lower household transportation costs, safer streets, more attractive communities and better health outcomes. Language from Sen. Ed Markey's and Rep. Jared Huffman's GREEN Streets Act (S.2084/H.R.5354) can be adopted to accomplish this.

In addition, Congress should implement strategies to increase fuel efficiency. Investments in highway infrastructure must include measures that address this fuel efficiency issue. They should include requiring:

- The retirement of all 2008 and older diesel vehicles used by DOT and contractors.
- Rest areas to have free air pumps for keeping tires inflated, which can have a significant effect on fuel mileage for any vehicle.
- Trucks to have fairings on the sides of trailers to reduce drag. This will also increase safety by helping to prevent under-carriage crashes.

We also need to keep our public transportation systems running. Essential workers need public transportation right now in order to serve our communities. When it generally becomes safe for more regular travel, the rest of us will also need public transportation again. With that in mind, we must provide clean travel options and prevent a flood of cars from returning to our streets. This imperative is complicated by the fact that many transit agencies are in financial jeopardy.

During the last recession, numerous agencies were forced to slash service, some of which never returned. The federal government has already helped with \$25 billion to keep transit running during the pandemic, but more support may be needed to provide the quality transit service Americans deserve.

Clean Energy

For decades, we have had the power to harness abundant clean energy from the sun and wind. In 2020, we can do it more efficiently and cheaply than ever before. Yet we're still producing, consuming and wasting energy in ways that do lasting damage to our environment and our health. For example, fracking for gas near schools instead of putting solar panels on their roofs; drilling for oil near beaches instead of harnessing the winds that blow offshore; and burning coal, oil and gas instead of powering our homes, cars and lives with clean renewable energy.

The clean energy industry is in [jeopardy](#) as a result of the global coronavirus pandemic. The energy efficiency sector alone supports at least [2.38 million U.S. jobs](#), almost half of which are in the construction industry. By offering incentives that promote clean energy, we can invest in cleaner technology that strengthens our energy sector while simultaneously bolstering an industry in need of aid.

Congress should invest at least \$7 billion in Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grants offered to cities, communities, states, U.S. territories and Native American tribes. These block grants can be used to develop, promote, implement and manage energy efficiency and conservation projects that create jobs. Previous stimulus bills, such as the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, included \$3.2 billion, which was disseminated to every jurisdiction.

Tax incentives have been key drivers in developing the United States' clean energy sector. Congress must ensure that there is no cap on the number of projects that qualify for clean energy and energy efficiency tax incentives. Tax credits for investments in energy efficiency, solar, wind, energy storage and electric vehicles should be extended for a decade to ensure stability and continued growth in this industry.

Lands and Parks

Americans' physical and psychological need for our magnificent outdoor spaces has never been more pressing. Public lands and investment in them are wildly [popular](#). Indeed, this is a rare area of enduring bipartisan support. Congress should pass a bill that ensures full and permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). Moreover, Congress should fund deferred maintenance on all public lands.

Beyond the [economic benefits of funding public lands](#), this sort of investment is needed from an ecological perspective. America is losing [two football fields per minute](#) to land development. LWCF has been an effective safeguard against this trend. Since 1965, LWCF has been used to conserve 15 million acres of land and provide more than 42,000 grants to states—[at least one in every county](#)—for everything from iconic national parks such as the Grand Canyon, Great Smokies, Acadia, Mt. Rainier and the Boundary Waters, to local hiking trails and city parks.

The program is supposed to receive \$900 million per year, but the money must be appropriated during the budget process, and only twice during its existence has LWCF received the full

amount. Over the years, \$22 billion—more than half of the total money raised—has been diverted from the fund’s intended purpose. We support legislation such as the Great American Outdoors Act (S.3422), which would secure full, permanent funding for LWCF in perpetuity.

Likewise, our national parks are chronically underfunded. As facilities age and visitation increases, the backlog of deferred maintenance continues to grow. The American Society of Civil Engineers gave our parks a [D+ infrastructure score](#). The National Parks Service now estimates 41,000 assets are in need of maintenance or repair, including bridges, trails, roads, campgrounds and visitor centers. As maintenance is deferred, these damages often become costlier over time. Further, many unaddressed repairs constitute a safety concern for both visitors and workers. These repairs largely represent “shovel-ready” projects that could start quickly and would benefit communities across the country.

Again, we support legislation such as the Great American Outdoors Act, which addresses the backlog by creating a National Park Service Legacy Restoration Fund. This fund would allocate up to \$1.9 billion per year of energy royalties towards updating and maintaining critical infrastructure on public lands (\$9.5 billion total), with 70 percent allocated for NPS projects, 10 percent for Forest Service, 10 percent for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 5 percent for Bureau of Land Management, and 5 percent for Bureau of Indian Education schools.

A 2012 [poll](#) of registered voters found that 81 percent had visited a national park and 90 percent were interested in doing so. In addition, Americans see the value in preserving our national parks for future generations. In 2016, [83 percent](#) of respondents said they would react favorably to their members of Congress acting to strengthen and protect national parks.

Agriculture

Congress should send funds directly to farmers to incentivize sustainable agricultural practices, which will benefit farmers over the long haul. For instance, the current farm bill (PL 115-334) includes funding for farmers to employ resource-conserving crop rotations. That is good in theory, but in practice, the direct payments to farmers have not been enough to drive on-the-farm change. Additionally, the farm bill funds farmers to plant cover crops. While more farmers have embraced cover crop funding, adoption could be much higher. Congress should fund U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) conservation programs that put money into the hands of farmers and boost a wide range of on-farm conservation programs—placing priority on increasing the payment rates for resource-conserving crop rotations and cover crops.

This is essential because boosting participation in these USDA programs would benefit wildlife—particularly pollinators. When farmers rotate three to four crops over multiple planting seasons, their need for chemical inputs, including fertilizers and pesticides, drops by roughly [80 to 90 percent](#). This is good for pollinators and wildlife, and greatly reduces water pollution. Increasing the use of cover crops would also provide additional foraging opportunities for pollinators and would generally be [beneficial to wildlife](#) overall.

The recent decline in pollinators poses a serious threat not only to our ecosystem but also to our food security and health. Pollinators include a wide variety of species, such as bats, birds, bees and other insects. Each one of these species aids in the life cycle of flowering plants and contributes to the production of our food. A UN report found that 90 percent of wild plants and 75 percent of all food crops [need animal pollinators](#) to some extent. Of those, [bees are nature’s](#)

[best](#). Pollinators are critical for crops like hay and alfalfa, which we feed to livestock. They also support the crops we need for drugs, fiber and fuel. Scientists point to a lack of quality habitats as a key contributor to pollinator decline.

The CARES Act included funding for agriculture. But the benefit of embracing farm conservation programs in the next stimulus package is that many of these programs put money directly in the hands of farmers, which helps farmers adjust to the types of sustainable farming methods that are needed for soil and pollinator health.

Solid Waste

Reducing and properly managing waste has always been vital to protecting our public health and the environment. As Americans shelter in place, municipal waste has increased across the country. In particular, personal protective equipment and other problematic plastic contaminants are being littered and incorrectly placed in recycling bins. This further exposes waste workers to viral transmission. As a result, haulers and recyclers face labor shortages and have been forced to either cut back or cease recycling and compost collection programs across the country.

In order to ensure proper waste management and strengthen our recycling and composting programs, Congress should authorize a federal grant program, allowing the EPA to administer \$250 million in funding for zero waste initiatives, as outlined in the ZERO WASTE Act (H.R.4050). This initiative would include organics and recycling infrastructure, e-waste recycling or reuse, source reduction and market development. It would also exclude any forms of incineration, plastics-to-fuel or so-called chemical recycling.

Congress has a unique role to play in guiding Americans through these tumultuous times. It is our hope that by working together to focus on protecting our collective health, fortifying our democratic systems, safeguarding consumers and borrowers, and building a resilient and sustainable infrastructure, we can emerge from this crisis a stronger country.

Sincerely,



Wendy Wendlandt
Acting President
Environment America



Faye Park
President
U.S. PIRG