

Ocean-Climate Actions to Support the Biden-Harris Plan to Build Back Better

Improving the Climate Resilience of Our Ocean and Communities in
the First 100 Days

February 2021

© Paul Feters Photography

Climate action, racial equity, and economic recovery are major and interrelated priorities of the Biden-Harris plan to “build back better.” As our communities face accelerating climate impacts—as well as social injustice and a global health crisis—ambitious actions to promote recovery and resilience are needed now more than ever.

The ocean can and should play a central role in the Administration’s priorities. In the United States, 127 million people—nearly 40% of the U.S. population—live in coastal counties, and all Americans rely on services the ocean and coasts provide (1). As an economic driver, the ocean and coasts provide more than two million jobs (2).

This brief outlines the ocean-based climate solutions that can support the goals of the Biden-Harris “build back better” plan (3), with a focus on opportunities to increase climate resilience within the first months of the Administration. It is a companion to “Ocean-Climate Actions to Support the Biden-Harris Decarbonization Plan: U.S. and International Ocean-Based Mitigation for the First 100 Days” (4). A separate report, “Action Agenda for a Blue-Green Future: U.S. Federal Ocean-Climate Recommendations for 2021,” details related recommendations with a focus on the entire term (5).

Building a Modern Infrastructure

- The Biden-Harris plan aims to build a modern, sustainable infrastructure that is resilient to floods and other climate threats (6).

Actions addressing sea level rise (SLR) should be a key element of the infrastructure plan to ensure U.S. coasts can withstand this accelerating climate stressor. Sea level rise and the frequency of tidal and rainfall flooding are projected to intensify and continue to harm communities across the country. In states affected by Atlantic storms, 76% of all storm-related deaths were caused by storm surge or flooding (7). Shrinking coastlines due to higher sea levels increase the likelihood of street flooding, damaging costly infrastructure and altering freshwater ecosystems and water reserves.

Providing substantial funding for infrastructure projects to prepare for higher waters can create jobs, helping communities recover from the economic toll resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Investing in projects in low-income communities that frequently bear the burden of increased flooding can also support racial equity. The federal government, unfortunately, currently lacks a coordinated response to these threats. The Biden-Harris Administration can begin to address this by:

- **Creating a Sea Level Rise and Flood Management Task Force** that includes the Administration, scientists, policy experts, and leaders from Tribes, municipalities, states, Congress, and federal agencies (CEQ, NOAA, EPA, NSF, NASA, USGS, USFWS, NPS, BIA, BLM, SI, USACE, USDA, DOE, DOD, DOT, FEMA, and Tribal, state, and local representatives). This Task Force should:
 - Review the best available science and determine one set of geographically-based SLR rates for Tribal governments, federal agencies, state, and local governments for planning and management purposes.
 - Develop a federal management strategy to understand, assess, predict, and respond to SLR and flooding in a coordinated and equitable manner, reducing nationwide disparities in planning and response.
 - Identify opportunities to prioritize, fund, and coordinate resilience and adaptation projects to meet states' needs.

- **Adding flood resilient requirements to projects funded by the Department of Transportation (DOT).** Elements such as bio-retention cells in raised roads or floodable parks as part of DOT plans can help reduce the duration and intensity of flooding events (DOT).
- **Conserving flood-prone undeveloped coastal areas** to reduce impacts of SLR and storm surge events to communities. The Biden-Harris Administration can bolster coastal protections of islands and wetlands through the Coastal Barrier Resources Act (CBRA) by prohibiting sand mining in designated areas, ensuring that all federal agencies comply with the CBRA, and evaluating options for expanding the system to the Pacific coast and undeveloped areas that are upland and adjacent to existing CBRA-protected areas (USFWS, NPS, BLM, USDA).

Advancing Resilience and Conservation

- The Biden-Harris plan aims to “create jobs in climate-smart agriculture, resilience, and conservation” (6). The plan highlights coastal conservation and restoration of wetlands, oyster reefs, kelp and mangrove forests, and the protection of special places like the Everglades and the Great Lakes.

A range of ocean-based measures can support the Administration’s commitment. These include not only conservation and restoration of ecosystems, but also marine protected areas, climate-ready fisheries, and actions to address ocean acidification.

Conservation and restoration

Coastal conservation and restoration measures are key to providing jobs that promote ecosystem and community resilience. These ecosystems provide habitat for wildlife and fisheries, sequester greenhouse gas emissions, contribute to subsistence livelihoods, help maintain and improve water quality, offer recreation space for communities, and help reduce storm surge, retain floodwaters, and build resilience to SLR, wind, and water erosion. They may also require lower federal expenditures to build and maintain compared to gray infrastructure (8).

- **Establishing a Civilian Climate Corps.** As proposed in the Biden-Harris climate plan (6), a Civilian Climate Corps would directly create jobs while using natural solutions to build climate resilience. Specific projects such as the restoration of mangroves, wetlands, and seagrasses would protect coastlines while directly sequestering

carbon (see section on marine protected areas on how natural systems also provide other benefits) ([USDA](#), [DOI](#), [NOAA](#), [DOL](#)).

Marine protected areas

Marine protected areas and other area-based conservation measures improve ecosystem and coastal community resilience by providing habitat for wildlife and fisheries, helping to maintain and improve water quality by filtering excess nutrients, and helping to reduce storm surge. Measures to increase and enhance marine protected areas in the first months of the Biden administration may include:

- **Fully reinstating previous designations of national monuments**, including in the marine environment. Using the Antiquities Act, however, should not circumvent science-based decision making or meaningful stakeholder engagement ([NPS](#), [NOAA](#)).
- **Developing and implementing a strategy to protect at least 30% of all U.S. lands and ocean areas by 2030** ([NOAA](#), [BLM](#), [USDA](#), [NPS](#), [BIA](#), [USFWS](#)). The Biden-Harris Administration should consider the different starting point, challenges, and opportunities involved in achieving this goal in the ocean as opposed to on land. The processes for establishing protected areas must be inclusive and equitable. They should respect Indigenous rights, include provisions for Tribal-led marine protection mechanisms, ensure public access opportunities, especially for underserved communities, and provide meaningful public and stakeholder engagement. (This recommendation is also included in the brief “Ocean-Climate Actions to Support the Biden-Harris Decarbonization Plan,” given that MPAs have the potential to sequester carbon.)

Climate-ready fisheries

Climate change is already affecting the people who secure America’s food supply. Fishermen, often based in rural areas, have long provided food for millions of Americans. Now, however, they must travel farther to catch their fish, which are producing fewer offspring and growing smaller and less resilient. Important fish habitats like corals and kelp forests are also damaged by warming and acidifying waters, changes in currents, harmful algal blooms, and increased nutrient pollution. Our fisheries and the food security, livelihoods, and recreational opportunities they provide are under threat. The Biden-Harris Administration must accelerate the transition to climate-ready fisheries. NOAA should initiate the development of a visionary plan to accelerate these efforts to include:

- **Directing through a NOAA Administrative Order that NOAA Fisheries shall monitor, evaluate, and predict climate impacts on fisheries** and integrate the best available science and knowledge on climate impacts into all fisheries management decisions, including through innovative sustainable management approaches, by 2024. NOAA Fisheries should consult with NOAA line offices and programs, regional fishery management councils, marine fisheries commissions, Tribes, states, fisheries stakeholders, universities, and conservation groups ([NOAA](#)).
- **Develop a plan for and announce a series of national-level meetings to strengthen stakeholder involvement** and share approaches for climate-ready fisheries. These events could be similar in format to the National Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Summit ([NOAA](#)).
- **Revisiting and updating the 2015 NOAA Fisheries Climate Science Strategy and subsequent Regional Action Plans** to identify opportunities and gaps in progress. A new plan should be put in place to implement remaining recommendations and create new recommendations that build upon the original efforts ([NOAA](#)).

Ocean acidification and coastal water quality

Addressing ocean acidification and polluted water quality is important for many industries that rely on healthy ocean ecosystems, including aquaculture and tourism. While reducing greenhouse gas emissions is the most important step we can take to reduce acidification (4), conserving and restoring coastal ecosystems naturally protects water quality and chemistry (see section on marine protected areas above). Minimizing local runoff pollution is also vital. The Biden-Harris Administration can do this by:

- **Prioritizing increased funding for programs that address water quality and ocean acidification in the President’s budget proposal** ([OMB](#), [NOAA](#), [EPA](#)).
- **Directing the EPA to issue voluntary guidelines for municipalities to develop fertilizer ordinances** ([EPA](#)).

Looking Ahead: Justice as an Overarching Principle

- Racial equity and environmental justice are key elements of the Biden-Harris “build back better” plan, which includes an emphasis on addressing historical environmental injustices by targeting resources to low-income

communities and communities of color, which are often on the front lines of pollution and climate impacts. Creating good jobs to clean up local economies from coal and other legacy pollutants, as well as equitably minimizing climate disaster risks, are just some commitments the Biden-Harris campaign made in its environmental justice plan (9).

Environmental justice and a just transition to a more modern, sustainable economy should permeate all actions of the Biden-Harris administration, including ocean-based climate solutions. Righting the wrongs of past injustices is critical to building back local economies and communities. Flood management efforts, for example, should prioritize historically disadvantaged, underserved, and marginalized communities that are often the most at risk from climate disasters such as sea level rise and storm surge. Meanwhile, blue carbon restoration projects should be co-designed and co-managed with local communities and Indigenous peoples; they also should be sited where Indigenous peoples currently have, or have lost, important areas for subsistence and cultural practices, and where disadvantaged communities would benefit the most from increased access to natural spaces, cultural heritage, and economic opportunities.

Contact

Ryan Ono, Manager, Climate Program,
rono@oceanconservancy.org
Anna Zivian, Senior Research Fellow, Science Team,
azivian@oceanconservancy.org

Citations

- (1) National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Office for Coastal Management. Economics and Demographics. Available from: [https://coast.noaa.gov/states/fast-facts/economics-and-demographics.html#:~:text=Coastal%20counties%20of%20the%20U.S.,land%20mass%20\(excluding%20Alaska\).](https://coast.noaa.gov/states/fast-facts/economics-and-demographics.html#:~:text=Coastal%20counties%20of%20the%20U.S.,land%20mass%20(excluding%20Alaska).)
- (2) National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Marine economy in 2018 grew

faster than U.S. overall. Available from: <https://www.noaa.gov/media-release/marine-economy-in-2018-grew-faster-than-us-overall>

- (3) Climate Change: The Biden-Harris plan to create union jobs by tackling the climate crisis. 2020. Available from: <https://buildbackbetter.gov/priorities/climate-change/>
- (4) Ocean Conservancy. Ocean-Climate Actions to Support the Biden-Harris Decarbonization Plan. 2020. Available from: https://oceanconservancy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Ocean_climate_action_for_first_100_days.pdf
- (5) Ocean Conservancy. Action agenda for a blue-green future: U.S. federal ocean-climate recommendations for 2021. 2020. Available from: <https://oceanconservancy.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/07/Action-Agenda-for-a-BlueGreen-Future.pdf>
- (6) The Biden Plan to Build a Modern, Sustainable Infrastructure and an Equitable Clean Energy Future. Available from: <https://joebiden.com/clean-energy/>
- (7) Rappaport EN. Fatalities in the United States from Atlantic tropical cyclones: New data and interpretation. Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society. 2014 Mar; 95(3):341-6.
- (8) Reguero BG, Beck MW, Bresch DN, Calil J, Meliane I. Comparing the cost effectiveness of nature-based and coastal adaptation: A case study from the Gulf Coast of the United States. PloS one. 2018 Apr 11;13(4):e0192132.
- (9) The Biden Plan to Secure Environmental Justice and Equitable Economic Opportunity. Available from: <https://joebiden.com/environmental-justice-plan/>
- (10) The Biden Plan to Build Back Better by Advancing Racial Equity Across the American Economy. Available from: <https://joebiden.com/racial-economic-equity/>

CONTACT US

-  +1 800-519-1541
-  memberservices@oceanconservancy.org
-  oceanconservancy.org

FOLLOW US

-  @OceanConservancy
-  @OurOcean
-  @OceanConservancy