

States Warn That Virus May Doom Climate Projects

A billion-dollar program to protect cities from climate change is at risk of failing because of the pandemic.



By **Christopher Flavelle**

Mr. Flavelle reports on how we adapt to the consequences of climate change.

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WASHINGTON — Connecticut is preparing to build a first-of-its-kind underground flood wall. Virginia has planned an intricate system of berms, pump stations and raised roads to keep the flood-prone city of Norfolk dry. Louisiana has broken ground on a new community for people forced to flee a village on its sinking coast, the country's first government-resettled climate migrants.

Projects in 13 cities and states, which were part of the Obama administration's push to protect Americans from climate change after the devastation from Hurricane Sandy, are now in jeopardy because of the coronavirus pandemic, state and local officials warn. And they need Republicans in Congress to save those projects.

On Monday, officials told lawmakers that the coronavirus will prevent them from meeting the conditions of a \$1 billion Obama-era program for large-scale construction projects that defend cities and states against climate-related disasters. That money must be spent by the fall of 2022.

Missing that deadline, which officials say is likely because of delays caused by the coronavirus, would mean forfeiting the remaining money, scuttling the projects. States and cities have been moving swiftly in the design phases and to secure permits since the Obama administration awarded the funds in 2016. Officials will ask Congress to extend the deadline for construction by three years, according to a copy of the letter obtained by The New York Times.

“Without an extension, any funds not spent by the deadline will be canceled and projects will remain unfinished,” the letter reads.

“These projects are absolutely critical for bolstering our defenses against future disasters,” said Jainey Bavishi, director of the Mayor’s Office of Resiliency in New York City, which got \$176 million to build gates along the East Side of Manhattan that would flip up to protect people and buildings during a storm or flood, and be used as recreational space the rest of the time.

The rush to save the program is the latest example of how the pandemic has disrupted American climate policy.

The Trump administration has used the virus to justify relaxing rules for polluters, despite concerns that air pollution may worsen people’s risk of dying from Covid-19. The virus has also exposed weaknesses in American disaster response because emergency managers cannot deploy staff as usual or operate normal evacuation shelters. And the economic fallout has forced cities to cut budgets for their own climate-resilience projects.



Children played near their home on Isle de Jean Charles, La., a few months after Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005. Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

The projects are the result of the Obama-era program, called the National Disaster Resilience Competition. Its goal was to encourage new ideas for coping with the accelerating consequences of global warming, by funding the best ideas and providing models for other parts of the country.

If state and local governments could figure out how to better protect their residents from disasters, the logic went, then the country could avoid spending billions of dollars each year rebuilding homes and cities just to watch them crumble again in the next storm.

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“The only fiscally responsible way to address climate impacts is to build infrastructure that spurs the economy, creates jobs and ensures we are not paying for repetitive losses,” said Amy Chester, managing director of Rebuild by Design, a nonprofit group created after Hurricane Sandy whose goal is to help cities recover from disasters more effectively.

In Connecticut, officials got \$36 million to help protect a lower-income neighborhood in Bridgeport that was flooded by Hurricane Sandy. Rather than build a typical concrete storm wall, the project is designed to blend into the landscape, according to Rebecca French, who until last month ran the project as director of resilience for Connecticut's Department of Housing.

By March, the state had finished the preliminary design phase, as well as environmental reviews, Ms. French said. It was planning to break ground early in 2021 and finish in time for the September 2022 cutoff. “It doesn’t leave a lot of margin of error,” she said.

Then the virus struck. In April, Connecticut’s housing commissioner sent a letter to Representative Jim Himes asking Congress to provide an extension, citing the disruption from the virus, according to Ms. French. State officials declined to comment further.

Isle de Jean Charles viewed from above. Some of its resettled residents are the first climate migrants in the United States. Josh Haner/The New York Times

The program doesn’t always aim to fortify neighborhoods against disasters. Sometimes the goal is to get people out of the way.

Louisiana won \$48 million to resettle the residents of a coastal village, Isle de Jean Charles, that is quickly being swallowed by rising waters in the Gulf of Mexico. Last month, the state began work on a new settlement further inland, called The New Isle. The schedule calls for finishing the last house by the end of 2021.

That schedule was already going to be tight, according to Pat Forbes, executive director of Louisiana’s Office of Community Development, which is running the project.

“All of these projects, all 13 of them, are very complex,” Mr. Forbes said. “These are the types of projects that do take longer to develop and construct.”

The pandemic has made it harder. “Every interaction with a government entity is going to get slowed down,” Mr. Forbes said. The construction could take longer as well, he said, as workers worry about exposure to the virus.

In Virginia, which was awarded \$121 million, officials have planned a series of projects in Norfolk, including building a flood wall, adding new green space to hold flood water and pump stations to move it out, and raising roads to keep them dry more often, according to Doug Beaver, the city’s chief resilience officer.

Officials finished the environmental impact statement for the project last spring, and broke ground in February, Mr. Beaver said. By March, the city had spent almost \$18 million on planning and administration. The goal was to spend the federal funds in full by August or September of 2022, just within the deadline.

Rising waters, wind and rain as Hurricane Sandy approached Norfolk in 2012. Steve Helber/Associated Press

On May 21, two months into the virus crisis, Gov. Ralph Northam of Virginia wrote a letter to his state’s representatives in Congress, asking that Congress extend the deadline by three years.

If that federal money went away, states and cities would be unlikely to be able to finance the projects themselves even in normal times. The damage done to state and local budgets by the pandemic makes it even less likely.

As of Feb. 28, most of the 13 recipients, which include New York City, New Orleans and California, had spent less than one-fifth of their allotted money, according to data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which manages the program.

In a statement, a spokesman for the department said the 2022 deadline “was created by Congress and needs to be fixed by Congress if they choose to do so.”

The slow pace of spending reflects the nature of large-scale infrastructure projects, according to people involved with them. Many of the cities and states have already spent millions of dollars designing and securing permits for their projects. When the pandemic hit, most had either just started or expected to soon begin construction, which accounts for the bulk of the cost.

On Monday, officials representing all 13 grant recipients sent letters to their congressional representatives as a group, echoing Governor Northam’s request. The change would require new legislation, passed by the Republican-controlled Senate and signed by President Trump, who has called climate change a hoax.

“These projects will help us understand what we can do to protect people and keep property safe,” said Marion McFadden, who led the National Disaster Resilience Competition at HUD during the Obama administration. “I think we should all care about that, because we just can’t tell where the next disasters will strike.”