

**COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER,  
OCEANS, AND WILDLIFE**

**REMOTE OVERSIGHT HEARING**

**MARCH 11, 2021 2:00 P.M. EST**

Oversight Hearing on *"Building Back Better: Building Resilience for the Economy, Climate, and Ecosystems."*

**Response to Questions from Members**

**Cassandra Moseley, Ph.D.**

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March 26, 2021

**Questions from Representative Cohen**

1. *In your testimony, you spoke a lot about community level collaboration and partnerships. With many tribal communities simultaneously affected by high unemployment and water insecurity, could working on solutions to water security also provide employment opportunities for these communities?*

It is critical to address the water and sanitation crises that tribal communities face, which have been laid bare by COVID-19. Water security in and of itself would create significant economic and humanitarian benefit. In addition, there is some potential for tribal communities to also receive employment benefit from these kinds of water projects. In general, the extent to which there are local jobs benefits from any given project varies considerably from place to place and depends on local capacity to do the work as well as the specifics of the mechanism (e.g., contract, grant, agreement) used to execute the work. One key ingredient in creating this kind of economic opportunity would be the existence of companies or organizations that hire tribal members and are able to perform the work. If there is limited capacity, it may be that business assistance, worker training programs, or other strategies may be needed to help build capacity. The support and involvement of tribal councils and tribal natural resource departments would be essential. When federal contracts are used to execute the work, how that contract is structured (e.g., duration, size, set asides, preferences) may impact whether tribes benefit. Grants and agreements with tribal governments or other local entities to conduct the work may also increase the likelihood that tribal communities receive direct economic benefit from a project.

2. *Workers covered by a collective bargaining agreement dropped from 27 percent to 11.6 percent between 1979 and 2019. This de-unionization is shown to have a direct impact on rising inequality. What role do labor unions play in restoration work, and how can federal stimulus encourage and capitalize on unionized labor workforces? Can you give us an example of where this partnership has worked well?*

There is some opportunity in training heavy equipment operators through Job Corps union apprenticeship programs that could lead to jobs in the restoration sector. Examples of unionized wildland fire suppression jobs in federal agencies also exist. However, the vast majority of businesses in the restoration sector are very small firms (sole proprietorships to a few dozen employees). This is particularly true for those businesses and workers located in rural areas and

small towns. Labor unions have therefore not played a significant role in restoration work. This context means that other tools are likely needed to increase equality, such as prevailing wage, safety, and wage and hour enforcement. For example, the Davis-Bacon Act and Service Contract Act require that contractors and subcontractors performing federally funded contracts (including restoration service contracts) pay employees no less than the locally prevailing wages and fringe benefits for corresponding work on similar projects in the area. Other strategies may include supporting small business ownership and entrepreneurship that helps create and retain wealth in rural communities, worker training programs, and labor and safety protections that support family wage jobs, multi-seasonal employment, and safe working conditions.

### **Questions from Representative Matsui**

*We know that historically disadvantaged communities are particularly vulnerable to climate change. Dr. Moseley, in your written testimony, you suggest that collaborative processes that are used for watershed restoration can help communities better respond to climate change and natural hazard events, such as wildfires and floods. You seem to suggest that this is particularly true for socially vulnerable communities.*

1. *Can you explain a bit more why this may be the case and are there ways Congress can support this work?*

Particularly in rural areas and other small communities, collaborative processes and social relationships are essential for strategically coordinating and leveraging limited resources. In addition, such “collaborative capacity” built in one arena is often transferable to another set of issues. The mechanics of doing collaborative restoration creates social networks and relationships that can be repurposed to prepare for and respond to natural hazard events or when a new issue arises in a community that needs attention. In communities with strong collaborative habits, the same set of community leaders work on many different issues. However, if networks are weak, people do not know each other, and they do not have a habit of working together, it can be more challenging to respond effectively in times of crisis.

It is important to support planning, preparation, and mitigation stages of natural hazards response, along with response and recovery. The ability of communities to proactively identify and prioritize social and economic risks and begin to address them can reduce social vulnerability. Supporting collaborative and partnership-based mitigation programs and encouraging the use of social vulnerability indices (such as the CDC Social Vulnerability Index) in decision making and resource allocation help reduce the unequal impact of natural hazard events.

### **Questions from Representative González-Colón**

1. *Can you discuss the need to support and invest in local-level collaborative capacity in order to effectively build resilience?*

Local collaborative process is critical to building agreement and coordinating efforts to develop and execute restoration projects across multiple landownerships, particularly given the voluntary nature of many conservation programs. While these processes can bring in volunteers, there is a real limit to the amount of work volunteers can be expected to accomplish. Paid staff are needed to effectively carry out key collaborative functions, which include: organizing and facilitating stakeholder meetings, conducting outreach to increase community awareness and access to opportunities, navigating regulatory requirements, acquiring resources, developing details of any given project between meetings, sustaining longer-term strategic communications and coordination, and deliberately planning for equity. It is typically staff at small local non-profit organizations or local offices of government agencies that perform this work. Small investments in the form of grant programs that cover the costs of these paid staff to perform these essential functions can make a significant difference in the ability of communities and their agency partners to develop and implement projects on the ground.

In addition, requiring inter-agency and inter-organizational collaboration within federal agency personnel job duties and rewarding collaborative participation incentivizes these key actors to engage. Adequately funding federal staff capacity to execute grants, agreements, and contracting functions and limiting administrative requirements for those processes is necessary for the effective and timely administration of federal dollars for collaboratively-supported work on the ground.