

OPINION

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The Delaware Way could be the key to tackling climate change nationally



Your Turn
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April is Earth Month and from the State House to the White House, it's good to see robust action on water, climate and infrastructure.

Constitutionally, Delaware is the First State and so it is in water. Sitting on the Delmarva Peninsula at 60 feet above sea level, Delaware is the lowest state with a quarter of its land in floodplain and a 130-mile coast with the nation's cleanest ocean beaches. Twenty years ago, Delaware passed laws creating the Water Supply Coordinating Council after the 1995-2002 drought emergency and Nutrient Management Commission for farms to protect the Chesapeake and Inland bays and in 2000 Bill Clinton signed the bipartisan White Clay Creek Wild and Scenic River Act sponsored by then-Sen. Joe Biden and Rep. Joe Pitts, a Pennsylvania Republican, to protect the interstate watershed that supplies drinking water to a fifth of the First State's residents. These cooperative water programs from a generation ago are good examples of the "Delaware Way" of getting along as a model for the nation.

Strategic U.S. water policy can tackle the four great challenges of humanity — climate change, the pandemic, racial injustice and the

Inland Sussex County is calm, cool and sunny. But along the coast, an offshore storm is churning up large waves and causing flooding in some places in this file photo. MADDY LAURIA/DELAWARE NEWS JOURNAL

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economy. At the Barcelona Climate Change Conference in 2009, scientists agreed that "climate change is water change" — the Clausius-Clapeyron equation holds that air warmed 2 degrees holds 7% more water vapor leading to more floods, drought, blizzards, melting glaciers and sea level rise. In March 2016, we were 200 scientists invited by former President Barack Obama to the White House Water Summit on UN World Water Day and after five years, look forward to Biden's Earth Day summit this week — which could prove to be a 21st-century Bretton Woods of climate.

How do we know climate change is real? Because institutions like Wall Street, the Fed and the U.S. military all take it seriously. The IRS is streamlining 40 green energy tax incentives to just 3 clean energy credits to spur wind, solar and EV investment. In 2020 by 5-0 vote, the Fed joined the 75 central banks in the Network for Greening the Financial System to restrain economic risk from climate change. In 2019 the Pentagon warned Congress about national security and climate risks where two-thirds of U.S. military bases are exposed to flooding, drought and wildfire. Catastrophic storms caused a record \$22 billion in damages in 2020 and without FEMA in-

tervention could bankrupt the trillion-dollar floodplain mortgage market held by Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac.

Sound U.S. water policy relies on principles of law, economics, governance, and science. Federal water policy peaked in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s with the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act, NEPA, Clean Water Act and Safe Drinking Water Act and now a new environmental era is presaged by the \$900 million 2020 Land and Water Conservation Fund Act, which passed 73 to 25 in the U.S. Senate.

Watersheds are flora and fauna factories that support a \$260 billion economy from boating/fishing/bird watching alone and after the 2008 recession the American Recovery Act (ARRA) funded 4.6 million green jobs cutting unemployment by 1.8%. Since rivers cross state lines — resulting in hydro-politics — EPA should resurrect the watershed initiative targeted by former President George W. Bush that invested \$1 billion to restore the Brandywine River in Delaware and Pennsylvania. To train scientists for the workforce, the U.S. should tap the Congressionally-designated National Institutes of Water and Technology authorized by President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 Water Resources Research Act at 54 land grant universities including the University of Delaware and Delaware State University.

Under our federal system, U.S. water policy is applied by the White House, Congress and 20 federal water offices in

10 cabinet departments with a combined \$30 billion budget — Defense, Interior, EPA, USDA, Energy, Commerce, USDOT, Homeland Security, NASA and State.

Here are some ways those departments can leverage their resources in relation to water infrastructure:

- The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and U.S. Navy Seabees should work together to build climate defenses.
- The Interior Department should protect 30% of U.S. watersheds by 2030 and speed up off shore wind leases to power 600 million homes by 2030.
- AmeriCorps funding should be quadrupled to put young people to work on the environment under the 1993 Community Service Trust Act.
- EPA should invest in the 40% of neighborhoods disadvantaged by poverty and pollution, convert CWA State revolving loans back to Title VI grants and protect headwater streams that supply drinking water to 100 million Americans.
- USDA should use the farm bill and FDR's Commodity Credit Corporation to fund regenerative agriculture (organic no till and cover crops) on 20% of the U.S. to sequester 370 million tons of carbon.
- The U.S. Forest Service should reforest 36% of the nation to store carbon with benefits of \$690 billion/year.
- As the Federal climate center, NOAA in Commerce should be elevated to be on par with EPA and NASA.

• Reassigned to Homeland Security after 9/11, FEMA has proved more responsive — and should remain so.

• The U.S. Coast Guard is a ready coastal agency — as we saw in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina — and should lead climate response in this maritime nation.

• The DOE projects wind and solar will exceed nuclear and coal by 2025 and approach natural gas by 2030 meaning the U.S. could be low carbon in a decade or so.

• USDOT should adopt fuel standards and expand mass transit and the electric vehicle fleet.

• NASA monitors the biosphere with a \$2 billion satellite budget that should be ramped up.

• The State Department should re-engage in 1991 UN Law of the Sea, 1997 Kyoto, and 2017 Paris climate treaties negotiated as the air warmed 3 degrees F and CO2 emissions rose 20 gigatonnes.

• To guide U.S. water policy, the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) should appoint an Assistant Director of Water and Climate in the White House.

U.S. infrastructure investment makes sense for the economy and ecology because clean water — and air — is neither red or blue, it's clear.

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