President Joe Biden’s Historic Infrastructure and Climate Investments Will Require Building Rural Capacity

Federal wildfire and flood resilience dollars are not reaching the rural communities most vulnerable to climate risk and least able to prepare.

Over the past year, Congress has delivered on President Joe Biden’s vision, making potentially transformational investments in America’s workforce, energy systems,
infrastructure, competitiveness, and community resilience. However, passing legislation and appropriating dollars is only a beginning. States, local governments, and rural leaders will have to prepare plans, apply for funding, and manage complex construction and restoration projects. All of this requires capacity—the staff, expertise, financial resources, and networks, including political influence—necessary to follow through on funding opportunities.

Rural places are often stretched thin. A natural disaster can easily overwhelm a small town’s capacity to respond. Infrastructure in rural areas is often already in relatively poor condition, and rural places have fewer assets and resources to deploy before or after a natural disaster.¹

The Center for American Progress recently released two reports that assess the ways in which missed opportunities in implementing federal resilience programs exemplify the challenges facing rural communities. Through interviews with various experts and federal, state, and local officials, the reports explore how resilience funding in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021—also known as the bipartisan infrastructure law—can better serve rural areas facing significant climate risk. While this research is based on case studies of specific programs, the reports also offer broadly applicable recommendations for decision-makers as they design and implement programs to include rural communities in efforts to adapt to and recover from the effects of climate change.

Some initial solutions may include:

**Capacity**

- Invest up to 20 percent of grants in building lasting capacity, such as hiring local and long-term staff; providing technical and leadership training; and sustaining planning, outreach, and peer networks so rural communities are not isolated.
- Target more noncompetitive project funding to low-capacity rural communities using metrics that measure physical and social vulnerability and capacity.
- Increase rural competitiveness for national grants by making small and appropriately designed projects eligible; enabling nongovernmental organizations

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to apply on behalf of communities and to coordinate regional projects; allow states to opt out of program implementation; and waive requirements that are barriers for underresourced places, such as matching funds, benefit-cost analyses, and certain mandates.

**Coordination and alignment**

- Align grant eligibility criteria and application requirements among federal agencies and programs. Move toward a single federal application, kept on file, to streamline the application process and eliminate duplication of effort.
- Coordinate and package federal resilience and rural development grants to leverage the economic benefits of climate and conservation investments.
- Shift the burden from communities to agencies to complete some application tasks such as compiling necessary data to determine eligibility and reviewing compliance with federal rules.

**Technical assistance and guidance**

- Provide agency assistance to help rural communities navigate the complex process of securing federal grants.
- Use different eligibility and reporting metrics that capture vulnerability and capacity, such as demographic and local capacity.
- Build capacity in agencies and regional hubs to better assess needs and help communities access appropriate resources; the Rural Partners Network at the U.S. Department of Agriculture is a good example.²

The opportunity provided by recent federal investments should not be understated: These resources will inspire and finance the very best climate resilience projects across the country to prepare communities for disasters before they strike. The bipartisan infrastructure law also prioritizes equity in grant-making, makes investments in the rural workforce, and includes programs and resources to build capacity. The recommendations offered here can improve implementation of these historic investments by ensuring federal assistance reaches communities most susceptible to natural disasters and least able to prepare for and respond to them—communities with limited capacity.

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**Endnotes**


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