

NYC Coastal Risk Reduction Efforts Are An Invaluable Investment

By Collin O'Mara & Stephen Weinstein

Hurricane season is an opportune time to evaluate mitigation measures and find areas for improvement. Since Superstorm Sandy, New York City has implemented a significant resiliency program to protect it from the next storm. Unfortunately, New York's efforts are not the norm.

There is a wide disparity among the nation's cities and municipalities when it comes to advancing measures to limit the impact of natural disasters. A national risk reduction strategy is needed to ensure that vulnerable areas have the necessary fortifications in place, including protective natural systems and open space.

Sandy exposed weaknesses in New York's infrastructure that made the city susceptible to storm damage, such as outdated building codes and weak coastal defenses. With support from the federal and state government, the city has focused on strengthening its defenses, making more than a dozen updates to building codes with stricter requirements aimed at protecting buildings from future floods.

Throughout New York, coastal defenses are being strengthened, including the development of a flood protection system for Lower Manhattan and restoration of New York's natural features. For example, along Staten Island, the Rockaways and Coney Island, natural defenses such as sand dunes are being developed as flood barriers. Additionally, 68 acres of Staten Island wetlands are being restored as a way to both preserve their value for fish and wildlife while enhancing their capacity to reduce storm impacts.

Risk reduction efforts that preserve or restore intact ecosystems, in combination with open space protections and engineering retrofits, are the best way to prevent storm damage and ensure a quicker recovery when natural disasters strike. Major hurricanes such as Katrina and Sandy are becoming more frequent and are increasingly difficult to predict. Having resiliency measures in place before a storm strikes is the most effective way to protect lives and property.

Unlike reactive post-disaster spending, allocating resources for proactive disaster prevention and mitigation has been proven to save money down the road. According to a 2007 study by FEMA, every dollar spent on mitigation efforts leads to \$4 in future benefits. In New York's case, investing in risk reduction measures will save billions of dollars down the road.

These savings are one reason communities across the country have initiated resiliency enhancement projects such as buying out high-risk properties, raising the elevation of homes and encouraging the development of financial incentives such as tax-preferable savings accounts.

However, too many of our public policies focus on post-disaster response instead of disaster prevention and mitigation. Indeed, a number of programs, such as the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) – though well intentioned – actually have the effect of putting people in harm’s way. Research shows that subsidized, scientifically unsound rates encourage risky development in flood-prone regions and reduce the incentives property owners and communities have to prioritize mitigation and resilience.

Congress must take a leading role to encourage mitigation at the federal, state, local and individual levels to ensure that all communities are protected, with a stronger emphasis on intact ecosystems, open space preservation and engineering retrofits.

Further delaying action will put more Americans at risk and make it difficult and costlier to rebuild and recover in the wake of the next major storm. Congress should follow New York’s lead and implement a robust mitigation strategy that will save lives and property in the future.

O’Mara is the President of the National Wildlife Federation. Weinstein is the Group General Counsel of RenaissanceRe and Chair of the RenaissanceRe Risk Sciences Foundation.