

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-1806

September 8, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President of the United States
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden:

Thank you for your recent visit to Louisiana to see firsthand the widespread devastation resulting from Hurricane Ida. As you know, our state continues to have areas where there is no electricity, water and wastewater systems are down, internet connections are cut, cellular networks remain out of service and fuel shortages continue to plague impacted areas. Despite these challenges, our people are strong and resilient, and we will rebuild – stronger and smarter.

Yesterday's emergency supplemental funding request anticipates long-overdue recovery assistance for Louisiana victims suffering from the mass devastation of Hurricanes Laura and Delta, three additional hurricanes, and a persistent pandemic. We appreciate your recognizing the need for direct assistance to hurricane victims, funding for the Federal Highway Administration's Emergency Relief program, relief for our farmers, and important assistance through the Natural Resource Conservation Service's Emergency Watershed Protection Program.

However, we are deeply concerned about a critical missed opportunity to specifically address timely recovery needs stemming from Hurricane Ida. Furthermore, your request excludes several of the critical priorities we discussed on your visit, which are as important for those recovering from prior storms as they are for those hit by Hurricane Ida. As we discussed at the St. John the Baptist Parish Emergency Operations Center, we cannot simply ask hurricane victims to rebuild right back where they were without the confidence to know their reinvestment, their businesses, and their families will be safe. Over the coming weeks, thousands across south Louisiana will receive that insurance check and will decide either to stay and rebuild or move on.

I noted that the Greater New Orleans Area Hurricane Protection System performed well, but those parishes and communities outside adequate hurricane protection systems in St. Charles, St. John, Lafourche, Terrebonne, Assumption, St. James, Jefferson, the Maurepas Basin, and other areas do not have the level of protection or resilience they deserve. We specifically discussed how important it is that the timing of resiliency improvements and protection measures move in lockstep with the recovery effort. You will recall the conversation regarding the Morganza to the Gulf and Upper Barataria hurricane protection systems; the discussion about some of our communities such as Kraemer, Lafitte, Grand Isle,

Des Allemands, and others that flooded; and how even our evacuation routes like U.S. Highway 90 were inundated before, during, and after Hurricane Ida.

Mr. President, I appreciate that you took the vital first step of requesting emergency supplemental funding from Congress in the upcoming appropriations bill, but a number of structural changes and additions are required:

- 1) **Hurricane Ida Disaster Assistance:** As you know, the State of Louisiana has requested as much as \$2.25 billion for housing unmet needs for Hurricane Ida alone. We can anticipate additional necessary funds for public infrastructure, resilience measures, and numerous other categories that are historically funded in disaster appropriations. There is an important opportunity now for you to request, and Congress to appropriate, disaster assistance for certain recovery needs. We believe your request to Congress opens the door for this opportunity by expressing the need (p. 34) for such funding, but it is critical for you and Congress to take this very important first step. You may recall that after the historic August Flood of 2016 (DR-4277), the White House and Congress reacted swiftly to appropriate a similar down payment within a similar timeframe, and in a Continuing Resolution, before the end of the fiscal year. Stated simply, we know the need, and now is the ideal time to act.

- 2) **Community Development Block Grant-Disaster Recovery:** As I detailed in my September 3, 2021 letter to you, the CDBG-DR program is too slow and bureaucratic to be helpful to Hurricane Ida victims. Nearly five years after the August Flood of 2016 (DR-4277), less than half of the CDBG-DR funding appropriated by Congress has even been “offered” to flood victims. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been diverted from flood victims to program management contracts and the program unlawfully discriminates against those receiving loans from the Small Business Administration. Additionally, a mere 15 percent of CDBG-MIT flood mitigation funds from 2016 have been designated, but not spent, for flood projects. But for the horribly bureaucratic process at the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Louisiana could have used these mitigation funds to eliminate or significantly offset the devastation experienced in the Severe Weather disaster of May 2021 (DR-4606), and in some cases Hurricane Ida (DR-4611). In all instances, if funds could have been spent quickly, Louisianians would be better protected, lives would be saved, communities would be preserved, and fewer federal disaster dollars would be needed. Equally important, HUD and OMB must consider the breadth and impact of actual damages. Louisiana’s experience with the CDBG-DR program after the August 2016 floods is a case study of why the program is too inefficient and too costly to help victims. Furthermore, *if* money is obligated to the CDBG-DR program, your Administration must clearly communicate the allocation of disaster funding to disaster-impacted states. Historically, executive action at HUD has simply shifted funding to higher population areas like New York and New Jersey at the expense of hard-hit areas in Louisiana. Lastly, though it is preferable to remove the federal disaster recovery mission from HUD, another reason to appropriate Hurricane Ida funds now is that it will likely take a dollar appropriated today between 9 and 12 months to get into the hands of disaster victims. Referring again to DR-4277 (which exemplifies *all* disaster recovery experiences):

- October 1, 2016 Congress appropriates \$437.8 million
- December 23, 2016 Congress appropriates \$1.2 billion
- January 18, 2017 HUD releases guidelines in the Federal Register Notice

- March 31, 2017 HUD approves Action Plan
- April 10, 2017 Restore LA portal launches and funds available

With the likelihood of the White House and Congress waiting to act on Hurricane Ida assistance, compounded by the impossibly time-consuming HUD approval process, disaster victims won't reasonably expect to see recovery assistance until January 2023. Further preventing recovery are the breathtaking costs and delays of ad hoc rules invented by bureaucrats who sit comfortably behind a desk while victims wait a year or more for a roof.

- 3) **Resilience:** Any emergency supplemental request must include dedicated funding for important investments in the protection of these communities. Large-scale projects like Morganza to the Gulf, Upper Barataria, and the restoration of our coast (including the repair of recent coastal project investments) are critical to protecting people, property, and Louisiana's fragile coastal ecosystems. These projects must be complemented by ring levee protection and non-structural investments in impacted communities like Kraemer, Lafitte, Grand Isle, and Des Allemands and funded in the initial phase of any emergency supplemental appropriations bill.
- 4) **Ports and Waterways:** Louisiana's waterways handle up to 19 percent of America's maritime commerce. The capacity and importance of these waterways cannot be emphasized enough. As you know, critical navigation channels like the Mississippi River, Bayou Lafourche, Houma Navigation Canal, Atchafalaya River, Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, and others currently have navigation restrictions due to debris, obstructions, and sediment. Louisiana cannot recover without the full capacity of these waterways. Dredging and obstruction removal funding must be included in your request.
- 5) **Seafood Disaster:** Louisiana is home to the top commercial seafood fleet in the continental United States. We are also one of the top recreational fishing destinations. The impacts on our seafood infrastructure – such as ice houses, shrimp sheds, the commercial fishing fleet, recreational access areas – and the ecosystem cannot be overstated. We urge you to have the Secretary of Commerce immediately declare a Fisheries Disaster Determination and include fisheries assistance in this initial funding package.

Again, I appreciate you visiting Louisiana and commit to working closely with you and your administration on the recovery of Hurricane Ida. Unfortunately, as we in Louisiana know all too well, hurricanes and natural disasters do not discriminate. We mustn't allow this effort to devolve into partisan politics. Attempting to leverage the critical needs of hurricane victims against a multi-trillion-dollar debt limit is playing politics with people's lives and livelihoods.

Sincerely,



Garret Graves
Member of Congress