



## **Better, Stronger, Smarter: Building Community Resilience in a Future of Extremes**

December 10, 2019

Senator Tammy Baldwin  
Opening statement (as prepared)

Chairman Schatz, it's a pleasure to lead the Special Committee's discussion on an issue that hits close to home for too many people in my state. I have no doubt that each of my colleagues has a story to tell about how climate-related disasters are already challenging communities in their state.

I look forward to the insight our witnesses will provide about how we must learn from the past to prepare for even greater challenges brought on by climate change in the future. And of course I want to extend a special welcome to Mayor Kabat, from La Crosse, Wisconsin, who has demonstrated exceptional leadership of his Mississippi River town during multiple major flooding events in recent years.

Empowering local leaders like Mayor Kabat to prevent damage is wiser and more fiscally responsible than scrambling to rebuild over and over after disasters hit. That has been our approach in the past, and it simply cannot continue to be our only response to this mounting crisis.

The federal government is fortunate to have an abundance of climate data and expert scientists who produce it. The problem is not a lack of knowledge about what climate change will bring. The problem is applying the knowledge we already have to how we design, build and live in our communities.

I'd like to talk a bit about the changes we are seeing in Wisconsin. Over the last century, overall precipitation across the United States increased four percent. In the Great Lakes region, it increased nearly ten percent. This increase is largely driven by extreme precipitation events, such as a day in August 2018 when La Crosse, Wisconsin received nearly 10 inches of rain.

Extreme events like this are no longer the exception. Infrastructure that has withstood storms for decades is failing—our infrastructure was not built to handle rain like this. In these photos from La Crosse, you can see the devastating impact storms can have, destroying critical infrastructure like bridges, roads, and rail lines.

Damage like this is a significant economic disruption, particularly in rural areas. In northwest Wisconsin, on Lake Superior, in July of 2016, a county-owned harbor and marina sustained nearly \$10 million in damage from intense rainfall and flooding. You can see some of the damage in this picture. In the midst of rebuilding efforts, which required dredging of the harbor, another serious flood struck in 2018. This damage closed the harbor for over three years, resulting in nearly half a million dollars of missed revenue for the county. For a small rural county, this is significant.

Climate extremes affect our Great Lakes and the people and communities near them. Lake Michigan's water levels currently sit three feet above the long-term averages. This means that coastal communities are even more vulnerable to flooding during extreme rain events. Some Wisconsinites living on the lakes are facing extreme erosion that threatens their property and public infrastructure, as you can see in this picture of a bluff collapsing into the lake on Lake Michigan's coast in Mount Pleasant, Wisconsin.

These events are not mere inconveniences. These are fundamental and dangerous disruptions to people's lives. And after a bridge washes out or a shoreline is eroded, communities need the tools, funding, and information to build better, more resilient infrastructure that can withstand this new reality of more severe weather.

Many communities in Wisconsin are focused on building back stronger and more resilient because they know and live the reality of a changing climate every day, and they know the enormous local costs to taxpayers.

Unfortunately, a lot of the tools communities have right now are delaying—or even preventing—actions to rebuild stronger and more resilient. Federal aid can be held up, making it difficult to move forward with repairs critical to daily life. Sometimes regulations make it harder for communities to act on information they have and make strategic investments for the future.

That's why I introduced the bipartisan Rebuilding Stronger Infrastructure Act to help ensure emergency highway funding can be used to fund roads and bridges that withstand the next storm. I appreciate the support of Ranking Member Carper, who worked with me to include this language in EPW's surface transportation reauthorization.

Climate change is certainly a big, global problem. But it is also, just as importantly, a local reality. Things are changing. Communities are struggling to stay ahead of those changes. We need to partner with our communities, towns and cities, counties and states to do more.

Fortunately, people across Wisconsin and across our country are leading the way to find their own solutions. The City of La Crosse provides funding for people to relocate out of high-risk areas. Local leaders are championing innovative nature-based solutions to reduce flooding pressure. These are wise investments that use taxpayer dollars strategically and guard against future loss of life and property. The federal government should encourage communities to pursue forward-looking solutions like these.

It's clear that our current approach not sustainable. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about their recommendations for confronting this problem affecting communities across our country. Thank you for being here today to share your expertise on the critical challenge of building a nation that is physically prepared to withstand climate change.