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News Release

DOI, EPA, NOAA announce Resilient Lands and Waters Initiative to prepare natural resources for climate change

Sites in southwest Florida, Hawaii, Washington, and the Great Lakes selected to showcase climate resilience approach

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - The Department of the Interior (DOI), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) today recognized four collaborative landscape partnerships across the country where Federal agencies will focus efforts with partners to conserve and restore important lands and waters and make them more resilient to a changing climate. Building on existing collaborations, these Resilient Lands and Waters partnerships – located in southwest Florida, Hawaii, Washington and the Great Lakes region – will help build resilience in regions vulnerable to climate change and related challenges. They will also showcase the benefits of landscape-scale management approaches and help enhance the carbon storage capacity of these natural areas.

The selected lands and waters face a wide range of climate impacts and other ecological stressors related to climate change, including sea level rise, drought, wildfire, and invasive species. At each location, Federal agencies will work closely with state, tribal, and local partners to prepare for and prevent these and other threats, and ensure that long-term conservation efforts take climate change into account. Additionally, the initiative will focus on conserving coastal wetlands and marine conservation areas, protecting drinking water for urban areas, and providing habitat for wildlife. These collaborative efforts will include the use of existing tools to benefit the entire landscape as well as the development of new tools. For example, in the Great Lakes, partners are developing a coastal wetland prioritization tool that will help determine where restoration efforts are most needed. And in the He'eia watershed on

the island of O’ahu, organizations are using NOAA’s Sea Level Rise Viewer to see maps of the potential impacts of sea level rise on the region.

Efforts in each region are relying on an approach that addresses the needs of the entire landscape. Over the next 18 months, Federal, state, local, and tribal partners will work together in these landscapes to develop more explicit strategies and maps in their programs of work. Developing these strategies will benefit wildfire management, mitigation investments, restoration efforts, water and air quality, carbon storage, and the communities that depend upon natural systems for their own resilience.

For example, southwest Florida is home to large tracts of open and working lands with diverse ownership, and partners in the region are working to identify and apply incentives to meet important conservation targets. And in Washington, as part of efforts in the Puget Sound, partners are collaborating on several projects that affect the entire Snohomish River watershed, including the restoration of important tidal wetland habitats, which will have major climate mitigation benefits. The landscape-scale approach demonstrated through this initiative, a hallmark of this Administration, allows agencies and partners to identify shared priorities and improve their future conservation efforts. Additionally, by tracking successes and sharing lessons learned, the initiative will encourage the development of similar resilience efforts in other areas across the country.

“Climate change is impacting every corner of the nation – from the Everglades to the Arctic – which has ramifications for our natural and cultural heritage, public health and economic activity,” said Interior Secretary Sally Jewell. “Through increased collaboration, we can pool resources and bring the best available science to bear as we take a landscape-level approach to make these treasured lands and waters more resilient to the impacts of climate change.”

“Building climate resilience on a regional scale is essential for meeting environmental protection goals in the long-term,” said EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy. “Partnering with other Federal agencies in this initiative we will ensure that our latest research plays a central role in protecting our nation’s most precious natural resources and keeping our economy strong.”

“The well-being of our families and our communities is closely tied to the health our landscapes and seascapes,” said Kathryn Sullivan, Ph.D., assistant secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and NOAA administrator. “The lands and waters initiative will help our partners better understand the climate change risks and uncertainties in these geographies, and provide decision-makers with actionable information to make their environment, community and economy more resilient to these changes.”

The Resilient Lands and Waters initiative is a key part of the Administration’s Climate and Natural Resources Priority Agenda, a first of its kind, comprehensive commitment across the Federal Government to support resilience of America’s vital natural resources. When President Obama launched his Climate Action Plan in 2013, he directed Federal agencies to identify and evaluate approaches to improve our natural defenses against extreme weather, protect biodiversity and conserve natural resources in the face of a changing climate. The Climate Action Plan also directs agencies to manage our public lands and natural systems to store more carbon.

More on the selected landscapes:

Southwest Florida: The southwest region of Florida includes a number of diverse habitats such as Everglades’ wetlands, coastal mangroves, sea grasses, oyster reefs, and estuary. Home to endangered species like the Florida panther, the region faces threats on multiple fronts – from increasing urbanization and land use changes to invasive species, rising seas, and shifting weather and temperature patterns. Recognizing Southwest Florida as a resilient landscape will tap into the work of the Cooperative Conservation Blueprint for Florida and Peninsular Florida Landscape Conservation Cooperative, which are leading efforts to address these threats, in partnership with Federal and state agencies, private landowners, the Southwest Florida regional planning council and

NGOs. The focus of the project is on the creation and use of voluntary and non-regulatory conservation incentives that can be applied to a comprehensive vision of conservation and restoration priorities across Florida.

Hawai'i: In Hawai'i, projects will take place in West Hawai'i, West Maui, and He'eia (O'ahu), where the improving coastal reef resilience is a major priority. Involving robust community engagement and multi-sector partnerships, projects at each location will rely on climate vulnerability data and tools to inform decision-making. In addition to improving reef resilience, such as through West Maui's Ridge-to-Reef effort, projects will focus on addressing shoreline erosion, removing invasive species, restoring streams, wetlands, and fishponds, and preventing wildfire impacts. Each location is already designated a priority location by the State of Hawai'i and NOAA.

Washington: In Puget Sound, Federal, state, and county partners are implementing an innovative approach to accelerate conservation and resilience of natural resources and communities in coastal watersheds. The collaborative effort will help better align financial resources and authorities of Federal and agencies behind large-scale projects that deliver multiple benefits to the ecosystem and the communities that depend on it. Specific efforts include using flooding hazard scenarios and predictions to inform project selection and planning efforts for agriculture and other land uses. And in the Snohomish River watershed, Federal agencies are working with state, tribal, and NGO partners to restore tidal wetland habitats, increase flood storage capacity and restore floodplains, and identify the climate data resources floodplain managers need to make informed decisions.

The Great Lakes: In the Great Lakes region, efforts will focus on restoring coastal wetlands. Higher quality wetlands are essential to improving climate resilience, including through flood mitigation and storm water storage as well as serving as carbon sinks that mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. The Upper Midwest and Great Lakes Landscape Conservation Cooperative is leading the effort, which spans Lakes Huron and Erie Coastal wetlands in Saginaw Bay to the Maumee River. Through the project, partners will develop a coastal wetland prioritization tool that will use wetland health and quality monitoring data collected over the past 5 years throughout the entire Great Lakes basin. When completed, this tool is expected to inform the selection of locations where restoration, enhancement, and protection of wetlands should occur.

View additional information on the four resilient landscapes, including maps and partners.

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