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House Natural Resources, Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee Jessica Dandridge-Smith

Table of Contents:

Long-form Written Testimony:	2
Programmatic Gaps:	5
Other IIJA/IRA Challenges:	6
Positive Examples of IIJA, IRA, and other projects in Louisiana	7
Appendix	8
I. More about The Water Collaborative of Greater New Orleans	8
II. What is the Water Collaborative of Greater New Orleans?	8
Defining Water Justice (Defined by TWC)	9
Jessica Dandridge-Smith's Bio	10

Long-form Written Testimony:

Hello and good afternoon. Firstly, thank you for the invitation to testify on behalf of Louisiana residents. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to represent my state and to help navigate this critical conversation.

I am the Executive Director of The Water Collaborative of Greater New Orleans (TWC), a nonprofit organization created to connect and strengthen communities and individuals who work on and benefit from the development of urban water management and water justice actors.

2023 was the hottest year on record, with a heat index reading as high as 120 degrees for months straight, killing at least 25 people and leading to over 4,766 heat-related emergencies¹. During this time, Louisiana faced a double water crisis; drought and saltwater intrusion came together due to a shrinking Mississippi River², leading to not only a lack of vital water resources for residents of Southeast Louisiana but also a potential mass lead poisoning event that would impact over 1 million people³. This, combined with an active tropical storm season⁴, tornadoes⁵, heatwaves, drought, a shrinking coast-line⁶, coupled with a failing flood and homeowners insurance markets⁷It often feels as though Louisiana can never rebound.

Nearly three months before the Infrastructure Investment Jobs Act, On August 29th, 2021, Hurricane Ida made landfall on the Louisiana coastline as a category 4. Wind gusts reached a maximum of 172 mph upon reaching the mouth of the Mississippi River⁸. Ida crept up Louisiana with fury and strength, sitting over the state for hours. Despite the PR agenda, Southeast Louisiana was never ready, and as daylight broke through the clouds, the intensifying UV rays revealed something we've known for decades.

Louisiana's most vulnerable communities can not survive another massive storm. 40% of coastal communities like Jean Lafitte and Laplace were uninhabitable, and 100% of Grand Isle was unliveable⁹. In New Orleans, the electrical grid was down for thousands of customers and wouldn't be restored for nearly four weeks or more. Due to the mass power outages, water and

¹ DUKE, B., HIGGINS, R., & Higgins, R. (2023, August 8). *Summer from hell leaving broken records across Louisiana; no sign of cooler temps soon*. NOLA.com. https://www.nola.com/news/environment/summer-from-hell-leaving-broken-records-across-louisiana-no-sign-of-cooler-temps-soon/article_65c35f0c-3622-11ee-83a4-6bfc71f975d6.html

² Harvey, Chelsea. "Here's Why Salt Water Is Invading the Mississippi and Whether It Will Happen More Often." *Scientific American*, 12 October 2023, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/heres-why-salt-water-is-invading-the-mississippi-and-whether-it-will-happen-more-often/>.

³ Nilsen, Ella. "The toxic, corrosive reason saltwater intrusion would be a catastrophe for New Orleans." *CNN*, 15 October 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/15/us/new-orleans-saltwater-lead-pipes-climate/index.html>.

⁴ DUKE, BRETT, et al. "Summer from hell leaving broken records across Louisiana; no sign of cooler temps soon." *NOLA.com*, 8 August 2023, https://www.nola.com/news/environment/summer-from-hell-leaving-broken-records-across-louisiana-no-sign-of-cooler-temps-soon/article_65c35f0c-3622-11ee-83a4-6bfc71f975d6.html.

⁵ See interactive map for data on tornadoes in Louisiana since 1950. <https://data.shreveporttimes.com/tornado-archive/>

⁶ GERMER, SOPHIA, et al. "Louisiana 2050: The state's perilous future as seas rise | Environment | nola.com." *NOLA.com*, 14 September 2023, https://www.nola.com/news/environment/louisiana-2050-the-states-perilous-future-as-seas-rise/article_af75ba34-4dae-11ee-94cc-c7fe71b2b51d.html.

⁷ Kousky, Carolyn, et al. "Louisiana's insurance crisis is a climate crisis • Louisiana Illuminator." *Louisiana Illuminator*, 2 April 2024, <https://lilluminator.com/2024/04/02/insurance-climate/>.

⁸ Erdman, J. (2021, August 30). Hurricane Ida's 172 MPH Wind Gust In Louisiana Among Nation's Strongest Measured. Retrieved July 25, 2024, from <https://weather.com/storms/hurricane/news/2021-08-30-hurricane-ida-172-mph-wind-gust-among-us-strongest>

⁹ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. (n.d.). *Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters*. <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/billions/events/US/2021>

sewage access was limited, and people who couldn't escape the relentless heat found themselves in desperate situations. All of this during 90-degree weather. It felt as if nothing had changed after Hurricane Katrina.

Every single system of infrastructure that should have worked in the wake of a storm failed. It's estimated that Louisiana received 391 million dollars in federal aid, most of which were forgiven loans. All that funding for what? While the severity of damage was nothing close to Hurricane Katrina, the effects lasted longer than anyone could anticipate. In our new COVID-19 reality, it became clear that while we've been packaged as resilient, the box was half-empty.

For years, I've referred to a paper published in Earthquake Spectra in 2003 that defined resilience in a tangible way. Within their framework, they explain that resiliency has four dimensions. 1)Robustness is a system's strength to withstand a given stress level. 2)Redundancy is the extent to which systems can maintain their functional requirements during disruption. 3) Resourcefulness is identifying problems and challenges and mobilizing resources as needed to prevent system degradation. 4) Rapidity, the ability to mobilize resources promptly to contain losses and reduce further disruption¹⁰. Someone could easily argue that Louisiana isn't resilient, considering the dimensions of resiliency. It could be argued that residents display high levels of perseverance, endurance, and tenacity instead. We have been able to overcome high levels of injustice, oppression, and inequity despite the systematic challenges of inept government on all levels.

Historically, federal loans and grants, state revolving funds, and disaster funds only sought to bring us back to the start. But what if the start wasn't where we shouldn't return, and where do we go if not there?

For the first time in my lifetime, the Biden Administration and Congress considered this question deeply to address the state's most profound challenges and create a thriving future for our state.

For the first time in my lifetime, the Biden Administration and Congress thought deeply about this question to address the state's most profound challenges and create a thriving future for our state. Louisiana has received 26.3 Billion dollars in federal infrastructure funding¹¹. We've already seen a series of victories, including unprecedented water and wastewater infrastructure funding, Lead Service Line replacement, and emerging contaminants like PFAS. We've seen increased importance for water infrastructure, affordability, quality, and accessibility, leading to other programs, like the Low-Income Household Water Assistance Program. IJIA and IRA have

¹⁰ Bruneau M, Chang SE, Eguchi RT, et al. A Framework to Quantitatively Assess and Enhance the Seismic Resilience of Communities. Earthquake Spectra. 2003;19(4):733-752. doi:10.1193/1.1623497. Please go to pages 746-750 for clear examples.

¹¹ [Louisiana-IIA-State-Fact-Sheet](#)

also pushed state agencies, municipalities, and water utilities to plan for and actively mitigate drinking water and sanitation system risks.

While this investment is a tremendous first step, we have mountains to climb to get Louisiana to a place of true resilience in the face of the climate crisis. The investment must be long-term, and federal agencies must oversee federal funding allocations to ensure that vulnerable communities receive their intended resources. We must champion publicly owned resources and utilities and require all public and private projects, including community collaboration and leadership. The extraction of fossil fuels is one of the driving forces of climate change. Therefore we must divest from the fossil fuel industry. For as much work that can be done to strengthen manmade infrastructure, the continued extraction and investment into fossil fuels perpetuate the problem.

Even with billions more, can the legacy of IJIA and IRA last under these circumstances? Can they be genuinely felt if residents of Louisiana feel the continual weight of the climate crisis? The state's Coastal Protection and Restoration Agency predicts that much of coastal Louisiana will be underwater by 2050 and must retreat to Baton Rouge or live behind 50-foot walls to survive. Forcing residents to choose. Leave behind your ancestral homes, culture, jobs, and community, or live in a perpetual state of chaos. In 2023, Louisiana topped the list for fastest shrinking state¹². So, while investment is critical, federal funding requirements must be met with innovation, collaboration, and communal knowledge. More importantly, it must be connected to stopping the crisis at its source, or the benefits will never be felt, the money wasted, and the hopes and history of millions of residents will be lost forever.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify and for fighting to ensure we prioritize the people who need it the most in all federal funding. I have listed the programs that Louisiana has received from both programs. While exciting, there is still room for improvement and space for growth. While this investment is an excellent first step, we have mountains to climb to get Louisiana to a place of true resilience in the face of the climate crisis. Below are my top-level gaps, challenges, and solutions that need to be addressed to ensure the federal government's investments are worth it.

Programmatic Gaps:

- IJIA granted \$50 billion in total for water infrastructure, but it's estimated that \$60 billion alone is needed to replace all LSLs throughout the country. The funding needs for utilities, including drinking, waste, and stormwater systems, far exceed the initial investment needs. To meet these

¹² Biernacka, Joanna, and Alexandre Fall. "Population Growth in Most States Lags Long-Term Trends." *The Pew Charitable Trusts*, 7 May 2024, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2024/05/07/population-growth-in-most-states-lags-long-term-trends>.

needs, the EPA says that it will need over **469 billion dollars over the next 20 years to maintain and improve water utilities nationwide.**

- Federal investment is a requirement. The *Water Affordability, Transparency, Equity, and Reliability (Water) Act* should be reconsidered to pay for these vital upgrades. With over 72 co-sponsors and 500 organizations supporting the bill, it's not only highly supported but it's also needed to ensure the IJA's initial investment is not in vain^{13 14}.
- Additionally, more funding and innovation are needed, especially for utilities to implement technologies to remove PFAS and other emerging contaminants from drinking water. Countries such as Switzerland and others have far outpaced the USA in contaminant removal. More guidance and room are needed to bring in new technologies to solve the PFAS and contamination crisis.
- By providing such a small investment in water infrastructure, we are setting utilities up to increase water inequality. Many public and private utilities plan on raising rates to cover leftover costs of these programs. This is problematic as 80% of most major cities are struggling with water affordability¹⁵. With initial investments from IJA, there is now new and/or infrastructure that requires maintenance. Policies for water affordability, such as the Low-Income Water Assistance Program¹⁶, and sustainable funding guidelines, must be continued to prevent an undue financial burden on rate-payers.
- More importantly, this funding must be connected to stopping PFAS at the source and holding bad actors accountable to ensure the federal government's billion-dollar investments are not in vain.
- Many water utilities, especially those most in need, lack the human capital and data to apply for funding. More technical assistance and funding need to be set aside to create an equitable starting point; otherwise, the programs will persist.
- There is no direct funding for water management and flood risk reduction. With an ever-growing flooding crisis and an insurance crisis, more direct funding is needed for flood mitigation and adaptation, as well as coastal protections.

Other IJA/IRA Challenges:

- **State agencies and representatives are undermining justice 40.** In states like Louisiana, congressional earmarks ensure more money goes to some communities and not others. We are seeing states redefining what a “disadvantaged community (DAC)” is for programs like State

13

<https://www.congress.gov/bills/118th-congress/house-bill/1729#:~:text=This%20bill%20increases%20funding%20for,Equity%2C%20and%20Reliability%20Trust%20Fund.>

¹⁴ Lakhani, Nina. “Biden urged to back water bill amid worst US crisis in decades.” *The Guardian*, 25 February 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/feb/25/joe-biden-water-act-bernie-sanders>.

¹⁵ Lakhani, Nina, and Bernie Sanders. “Revealed: millions of Americans can't afford water as bills rise 80% in a decade.” *The Guardian*, 23 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/23/millions-of-americans-cant-afford-water-bills-rise>

¹⁶ The Water Collaborative: Low Income Water Assistance Program Establishment Act. 18, March, 2024. <https://www.nolawater.org/federal-policy-campaigns/2024/low-income-household-water-assistance-program-establishment-act>

Revolving Funds (SRFs), leading to inconsistent definitions among states and unrealistic definitions that limit the prioritization of funding and projects in actual DACs within a state.

- For example, in Louisiana, the DWSRF program¹⁷ defines a DAC as a community whose water system does not comply with the SWDA (*page 12 of IUP*). Water systems not in compliance should already be accounted for and prioritized because they violate federal law. They should not be a defining measure for a DAC.
- DACs should be defined as those with limited incomes and, therefore, limited financing, those with significant infrastructure needs due to aging and outdated infrastructure, and those with a majority of marginalized community members.
- **More funding is needed for community-based organizations (CBOs) to participate and leverage IRA and IIJA funding, which limits us to technical assistance.** The work of CBOs, like The Water Collaborative, has created the precedent for where we are on water justice. CBOs have advocated, conducted the meetings, made the recommendations, submitted public comments, and held the line to ensure accountability is reached. CBOs deserve to be included at the decision-making table and help meet the goals set out by IIJA and IRA.
 - Most water infrastructure funding goes to municipalities or water utilities that aren't required to work with community groups and have minimal community engagement requirements. Community engagement and input should be a requirement, not an option. This community engagement should also be conducted in partnership with CBOs, Universities, and neighborhood associations.
- Public hearings and public comment requirements for state agencies are needed as many communities are unaware of opportunities to provide input, leading to a growing gap in trust and apathy. Requiring community leadership on federally funded projects will have greater and more sustainable impacts.
- More needs to be done on the flood and homeowners insurance crisis. Even with historical funding from IIJA and IRA, it's clear that it's becoming too little, too late for many. States must implement creative and innovative solutions such as state-wide pooled insurance and/or parametric insurance. Additionally, FEMA and private insurance markets must create affordability options and equity-centric climate migration strategies.

Positive Examples of IIJA, IRA, and other projects in Louisiana

- GNO Inc. Regional Infrastructure Investments Discretionary Award List, November 2021 - July 2024.
- City of New Orleans Funded Programs:
- Community Lighthouse Project (example of community-led environmental justice and disaster preparedness).

¹⁷ "INTENDED USE PLAN." *La Dept. of Health*, 18 August 2022,

https://ldh.la.gov/assets/oph/Center-EH/DrinkWaterRevolve/DWRLF_Financial/2022_Intended_Use_Plan.pdf

- [NOAA's Climate Ready Coasts Initiative 2024 Louisiana Winners.](#)
- [Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority's 2023 Coastal Master Plan.](#)
- [Louisiana's 2022 Climate Action Plan](#)
- The Water Collaborative's **Water Justice Fund**. The Water Justice fund is a community-led and created climate reparative stormwater fee that will redirect funds from tax-exempt organizations and businesses toward neighborhood-scale resilience and risk mitigation projects, workforce development, and much more. If successfully implemented in 2025, the Water Justice Fund will be the first-ever community-funded municipal funding source strictly used for private and local flood, heat, drought, and public health mitigation. The Water Justice Fund will also create a continual funding source for data collection, qualitative feedback, and project evaluation. We will make recommendations to other cities struggling with finding sustainable funding for water management and other climate risks.

Appendix

I. More about The Water Collaborative of Greater New Orleans

The mission of the Water Collaborative is to build a diverse network for all impacted by flood risk by focusing on equitable practices to sustainably live, thrive, and love water for every resident.

Our vision is an inclusive network of communities that work to ensure our world is climate resilient. The greater New Orleans region is a leader in rights-based water management. We strive to ensure equitable policies and measures are always considered and that the most vulnerable communities receive resources for their sustainable development.



II. What is the Water Collaborative of Greater New Orleans?

The Water Collaborative of Greater New Orleans (TWC) is an advocacy coalition created in 2013 by a unique group of climate, water, and infrastructure advocates. After Hurricane Katrina, residents, elected officials, government agencies, engineers, and architects realized that the gray infrastructure pivotal to the city’s success in the 20th century was vulnerable to failure and incapable of meeting the city’s 21st-century challenges. New Orleans and surrounding parishes have a history of levee and gray infrastructure failure. From August 29th to August 30th, 2005, the levee systems, managed and maintained by the Army Corps of Engineers, failed in 50 locations, flooding over 80% of the city. Seventeen years and twenty-five billion dollars later, significant changes have been accomplished through federal investment to repair gray infrastructure as part of the recovery process. This was a clear example of funds benefiting a failing system rather than the residents most impacted by its failure, further exacerbating inequities.

The founders of TWC understood that New Orleans required a new methodology to combat the bowl effect¹⁸ and the mounting inequities from pre and post-Katrina. Motivated by meetings with the Dutch and ongoing research, we realized we must un-engineer the engineered. Poorly designed, improperly maintained, and racist and classist urban infrastructure must go back to a greener state reminiscent of its former landscape of cypress swamps and marshland. Since 2014, and inspired by the completion of the Urban Water Plan¹⁹, our goal has been to support the concept of “living and thriving with water.” Living and thriving with water means making 80% of the city’s surface-built environment pervious to reduce

¹⁸ “Why is New Orleans Vulnerable: <https://people.uwec.edu/jolhm/eh3/group7/WhyNOVulnerable.htm>

¹⁹ Greater New Orleans Urban Water Plan: <https://wbae.com/projects/greater-new-orleans-urban-water-plan-2/>

natural and man-made flooding risks, undo historic racist practices, and create a sustainable city that can sustain stronger tropical storms, pluvial flooding, and other climate risks such as heatwaves and drought. We envision a city that thrives by addressing climate, racial, and class trauma by developing green spaces.

Since 2019, we expanded the definition of thriving to include water access, affordability, and quality. For many Black and low-income residents, focusing on climate change when you're suffering from the compounding impacts of repetitive urban flooding, tropical events, and ongoing divestment into the infrastructure is short-sighted and furthers inequities. TWC has balanced our aging water infrastructure with the complexity of our urban planning systems through work that educates and empowers residents to influence and lead in often exclusive, political, and white power systems that control our green and water spaces and systems. We invest our programs and initiatives towards building Movement Infrastructure to create community power in these spaces. The Movement Infrastructure process of The Water Collaborative uses a collaborative approach and the strategic guiding tools of education, policy, and equity to create lasting social change through the lens of water. We help shift social and political agendas through our seven values to transform ideas about the feasibility of thriving with water. By developing more opportunities for cross-sector pollination, we support a shared framework that has led to structural change in just eight years. Our advisory groups best demonstrate our power-building structure. In these groups, residents and professionals collaboratively share ideas, design projects, and create innovative ideas. Advisory groups work with staff to develop workshops, guide policy decisions, and design systems to develop and maintain procedural, structural, and distributional equity. Informed by the people who manage, construct, and live in these systems, we create politically informed, strategic policies and tools that elevate our organization to lead positive systems change rooted in justice, equity, and transparency.

As the only water advocacy coalition in the region open to all and encouraging government and business participation, we build power and cultivate equitable and community-centric systems that influence spaces inside and outside the water management sector.

Defining Water Justice (Defined by TWC)

Water justice is an advocacy and policy movement that seeks to ensure everyone can access clean, affordable, and reliable drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater management. To achieve a just water system, water ecosystems must be ecologically respected and publicly owned and operated. Water Justice is an extension of Environmental Justice and works at the intersection of water infrastructure systems, both ecologically and socially, and policies, laws, and de facto norms to achieve a holistic, one-water approach to water management and usage.

Jessica Dandridge-Smith's Bio

As the Executive Director of The Water Collaborative of Greater New Orleans (TWC), Jessica Dandridge-Smith has dedicated her life to community advocacy and campaign development for organizations seeking to be socially, economically, and culturally inclusive. As the Executive Director of TWC, she focuses on community-led adaptation and mitigation as the core of water justice and climate resiliency strategies. Jessica believes communities need to be redundant, rapidly distributed resources to

be resilient. To achieve this, Jessica has led a movement around water management as a tool for social and economic liberation that should be transformational to our most vulnerable communities. Today, TWC focuses on nature-based water management, hazard mitigation, and water justice through access, affordability, quality, and equitable community transformation through blue/green jobs and the renewable economy.

Ms. Dandridge-Smith received her B.A at Xavier University of Louisiana in Political Science and her M.A in International Affairs with a concentration in conflict and security at The New School for Public Engagement in New York City. Since starting her career as a youth organizer in 2005, she has worked for or collaborated with over two dozen organizations in Greater New Orleans and nationally. Ms. Dandridge-Smith is a trained facilitator from YPQI, has a certificate in Leadership, Activism, and Civil Rights from Brown University, and a certificate in Kingian Nonviolence Strategies from the Selma Center of Nonviolence. In her current work, Jessica is the Co-Chair of the National Academy of Science, Engineering, and Medicine's Climate Resiliency Roundtable and a state Commissioner for the Governor's Advisory Commission on Coastal Protection, Restoration, and Conservation. In 2023, Jessica was selected for the 2023 Obama Leader USA Cohort and was selected for 40 under 40 in the Greater New Orleans Region. In her spare time, Jessica co-owns a family-owned Jamaican/creole catering business that has operated since the 1980s and cooks for over 500K people during the Jazz and Heritage Festival.