

Testimony from the County of Los Angeles Chief Sustainability Office

Delivered to the Joint Legislative Committee on Emergency Management

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Thank you to the Chair for the invitation to speak today.

My name is Kristen Torres Pawling and I am a Sustainability Program Director in the County of Los Angeles Chief Sustainability Office. I also serve on the Insurance Commissioner's Climate Insurance Working Group.

The Chief Sustainability Office is charged with overseeing the implementation of the nation's most ambitious regional sustainability plan, which we call OurCounty. Adopted by the Board of Supervisors in 2019, it defined sustainability comprehensively and incorporated equity and resilience in every chapter.

While OurCounty was groundbreaking in many ways, the one that we are most proud of was its approach to centering equity in our stakeholder engagement. We spent a year listening to a diverse set of stakeholders before we ever wrote down a word of the plan.

During that process we heard a lot of about people-centric climate resilience which is critically important in Los Angeles County where low-income communities and communities of color are disproportionately impacted. We responded directly by establishing targets that centered human health like reducing by 45% the number of heat-stress emergency department visits by 2035 and converting 30% of the regions' heat-trapping surfaces to cool or green surfaces by 2045. Those are just two out of over 50 targets that demonstrate our willingness to be bold and ambitious, but I will note that we do not have a dedicated funding stream to help us or the 88 cities of Los Angeles pursue them. The County's leadership with those targets deserves resources from the state to help catalyze the change that we heard that the community wants.

Another example of the kind of climate resilience actions we took on after the adoption of the plan is our Climate Vulnerability Assessment. It was so important to stakeholders that we actually wrote down the need to make a Climate Vulnerability Assessment twice in the plan. The OurCounty Plan identified the need to both assess social climate vulnerability--meaning how do social factors like income, age, disability and health, race and ethnicity influence climate vulnerability and also physical climate vulnerability--- meaning how is our physical infrastructure vulnerable to climate change. We also examined what we call cascading impacts, meaning what are the downstream results on communities of those first order impacts. We did this comprehensive countywide assessment with County budget in order to support the incorporated cities in LA complete their state mandated SB 379 requirements to update their safety elements to account for climate change. So, we have created a tangible benefit for the region to do better climate resilience planning and hope that the state sees that investing in LA County for climate resilience will pay off.

During this process, we held listening sessions with specific populations like people with disabilities, tribal and indigenous communities, and outdoor workers often left out of these kinds of conversations. There we heard stories of how people and organizations filled the gap when there were no government interventions or when those interventions did not serve those particular communities. That community wisdom is out there and it's a matter of taking the time to listen, letting community lead the way, and providing resources to these kinds of leaders and innovators.

While we need a lot of new financial resources, we also need these community-centered approaches to make any new resources go as far they possibly can to address the needs of the most vulnerable. Simply having money to open cooling centers really isn't enough when people don't know the centers exist or fear government run cooling centers because of immigration status or they cannot physically get there because of transportation issues. We need to make existing interventions more effective or pivot to interventions that community members will actually make use of.

One point we make clear in our forthcoming report is that climate vulnerability is not about inherent weakness or ineptitude of certain people or populations. It is instead about systemic failures like inequities in infrastructure and access to economic opportunity, institutionalized bias or exclusion from political power, environmental conditions, etc.

While the final report and map are forthcoming, we do already have a good sense of the findings which are too numerous to describe here today. But one particularly interesting finding is that during climate events, just like we've witnessed during COVID, essential workers are once again, essential. We need new resources to ensure that essential workers are able to safely do their jobs during climate disasters which in turn keeps whole communities safe.

Given these findings and given that we are the county with the highest share of disadvantaged communities in the state, worsening inequalities due to climate change should be a key concern of state government. Whether we are talking about funding for resilience hubs, back up energy at critical community facilities, or even new land use tools that could help us deal with new and existing development in wildfire prone areas, all of those interventions should begin with community conversations to inform their design to help us halt the march towards a more inequitable future. The state legislature has an opportunity to help us reject a future where climate disaster deepens inequality. We urge you fund the kind of people-centric approach to climate disaster preparedness that we have outlined here today.

Thank you for including the County of Los Angeles in today's hearing and I'd be happy to answer any questions.