EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We are at a pivotal moment in time. In the wake of COVID-19, Congress has made — and is considering additional — investments to jump-start the economy and bring the millions of unemployed Americans back to work. At the same time, Congress has a historic opportunity to make significant investments in our crumbling infrastructure, which has been underinvested in for decades. Investment in water infrastructure and healthy rivers will not only create jobs, it will also strengthen our communities, improve public health and safety, address longstanding injustices and improve our environment.

While COVID-19 is shining a grim light on injustices surrounding the availability of clean water for all, our rivers and water infrastructure have been neglected and abused for decades. Too many people in our country lack access to safe, clean affordable water — two thirds of which comes from rivers and streams.1Centuries of poor river management has degraded ecosystems and disconnected communities from their rivers. And, the impacts of climate change — increased drought, severe storms and increased flooding — are exacerbating existing vulnerabilities in communities across the country.2 Many of these inequities fall disproportionately on Black, Indigenous, Latinx and other marginalized people. Our nation is in a defining moment, as we grapple with the coronavirus pandemic, a historic economic downturn and the reality of climate change. Equitable investment in clean water and healthy rivers can be a powerful part of the solutions needed to rebuild our communities and economy.

Clean water and healthy rivers are smart investments that can contribute significantly to economic growth and job creation. The Value of Water Campaign3 estimated that every $1 million spent on water infrastructure in the United States generates more than 15 jobs throughout the economy. Similarly, the University of Oregon4 found that every $1 million invested in watershed restoration creates 16 new or sustained jobs on average. Healthy rivers also spur tourism and recreation, which many communities rely on for their livelihoods. The Outdoor Industry Association’s National Recreation Economy Report5 found that Americans participating in watersports and fishing spend over $174 billion on gear and trip related expenses. And, the outdoor watersports and fishing economy supports over 1.5 million jobs nationwide.

To put our economy back on track, while addressing some of our nation’s most pressing challenges, Congress must increase funding for healthy rivers and clean water. Any infrastructure, economic stimulus or jobs bill crafted to address the COVID-19 economic crisis must include major investments in water infrastructure, flood management and watershed restoration. American Rivers recommends Congress invest $500 billion for rivers and clean water over the next 10 years. We recommend an initial investment of at least $50 billion to address the urgent water infrastructure needs associated with COVID-19 and shovel-ready projects to improve flood management and restore rivers across the country.
We recommend the funds be prioritized in the following ways:

**Improve Water Infrastructure.** At a minimum, we recommend $200 billion over 10 years to improve water infrastructure and prioritize funding where it is needed most. This includes:

- Increasing financial support from state and federal governments to ensure safe and affordable clean water and sanitation through water infrastructure improvements and maintenance. Because of disparities in local abilities to pay for water infrastructure, only the federal and state governments have the resources to ensure equitable access to clean water;
- Developing water assistance programs that ensure basic levels of water and sewer services are available and affordable for all communities;
- Supporting democratic decision-making in local and regional water management. Decision-making around water infrastructure does not always include full community engagement and participation, or take into consideration the impacts, particularly with low-income and communities of color. The federal government must encourage local jurisdictions to ensure a more democratic and inclusive approach to water infrastructure decision-making; and
- Prioritizing investments toward solutions that maximize economic, social and environmental benefits and improve community resiliency, such as green stormwater infrastructure.

**Modernize Flood Management.** At a minimum, we recommend $200 billion over 10 years that will provide investments to incentivize a shift from outdated flood control to an integrated flood management approach that prioritizes equitable, multiple benefit solutions that ensure all communities are resilient to flooding. This includes:

- Incentivizing and building capacity for natural infrastructure solutions for flood management and community resiliency in federal agencies, including Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE);
- Ensuring flood hazard mitigation plans consider climate change, include climate resiliency planning and integrate natural infrastructure or nature-based solutions;
- Directing and funding the Federal Interagency Floodplain Management Task Force to update the Unified National Program for Floodplain Management to better integrate floodplain management at the federal level; and
- Creating a new grant program, housed within the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, that will assist tribes, state and local governments, and regional watersheds in implementing and building capacity for multi-benefit floodplain projects and initiatives.

**Restore Watersheds in our Communities.** At a minimum, we recommend $100 billion over 10 years to restore rivers, make agriculture more sustainable and improve recreation opportunities. This includes:

- Prioritizing integrated water management plans that identify actions to protect existing and future water uses and support healthy rivers in the face of population growth, changing land uses and climate change;
- Incentivizing agricultural improvements, including updating irrigation infrastructure, improving and mitigating the adverse water quality impacts of drainage systems, expanding the use of cover crops, and restoring marginal farmland to native floodplain and wetland habitat;
- Developing a new Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) that will restore rivers and riparian habitat and improve recreational access; and
- Investing in dam removal, culvert replacement and other infrastructure improvements that benefit the environment and public safety.
When investing in these solutions, it’s critical we invest equitably. Any future federal infrastructure investment program should include criteria to ensure the funding results in a more sustainable and equitable future for Americans from coast to coast. Federal investment must prioritize projects and programs that:

- Equitably distribute funds to communities — prioritizing those that routinely experience underinvestment. This includes low-income neighborhoods and Black, Indigenous and Latinx communities;
- Develop an employment track that targets those that are underemployed, particularly in communities that have experienced underinvestment; and
- Prioritize projects that will create high-quality jobs and bolster local economies while improving the health of rivers and their surrounding lands.

As we seek to reinvigorate our economies and communities in the wake of COVID-19, we must seize the opportunity to build smarter. We need to integrate our systems across bureaucratic silos to maintain clean water, resilient communities and healthy rivers in a time of change and growth. We must confront our legacy of privileged white and wealthy communities at the expense of communities of color and low-income communities.

This white-paper provides a framework for how Congress can invest equitably in healthy rivers and clean water. It includes case studies of successful investments and describes where federal investments should be directed in order to support healthy rivers, clean water, economic recovery and strong communities.

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