

Renewable Natural Resources Foundation
Congress on Coastal Resilience and Risk
December 11-12, 2013

Opening Remarks of RNRF Congress Program Committee Chair Tom Chase

I would like to welcome you to our Congress on Coastal Resilience and Risk.

It has been my honor to work with the RNRF staff and with the congress planning committee to organize this compelling congress. We started planning for this meeting over a year ago, after the devastation of Super Storm Sandy again showed us how important having resilient coasts is to our country.

To help us plan for this congress, we held a focus group with representatives of federal agencies, congressional committee staff, and other non-governmental organizations to hear their perspectives on the topic of coastal resilience. We also enlisted the invaluable help of Charley Chesnutt, a coastal engineer at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Institute for Water Resources, to help us refine the program and identify some of our speakers. We are grateful to Charley and to everyone who helped us put this program together.

My organization, the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), has long taken a keen interest in helping to make communities more sustainable, especially communities prone to flooding risk. Six years ago, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina's devastating impacts on the U.S. Gulf Coast, ASCE issued a call for action urging the nation to address the growing challenge of increasing flood losses in the U.S. and the threat to the safety of the population that lies in the potential paths of such events.

Over the past year, an ASCE committee examined our national response to this call for action. It was clear to the committee that while some progress has been made in limited areas, in general, the flood challenge continues to receive scant attention and much remains to be accomplished to safeguard the wellbeing of people and property. If the devastating impacts of Super Storm Sandy and the losses sustained in floods and hurricanes since Katrina were to be used as the measures of progress, the nation has failed to heed the call.

Consider that:

- There is no common vision of how the nation should organize and coordinate to reduce its flood risk. Proposals to deal with this challenge have languished in multiple committees of the U.S. Congress.
- We do not have a sound analysis of the potential risk to the nation from flooding. In 2007, the congress called for the president to conduct a national flood vulnerability assessment. No funds have been provided by the congress to carry out that assessment. We are operating in the dark as we continue to

- underfund our flood risk mapping programs. The public at large and many public officials clearly do not understand the risks that we face.
- Our flood infrastructure, primarily dams, levees, coastal dune systems and other coastal defenses, remain in near-failing condition and there is no realistic plan in place to deal with or improve their condition. Federal funding is minimal and local communities lack adequate resources. Efforts to develop innovative funding mechanisms fall prey to political obstacles.
 - Climate change and population growth will further stress this already difficult situation. FEMA reported earlier this year that by the end of the century the 100-year floodplain in the contiguous states could expand by 45%. In addition, the continuing development affecting flood prone areas exacerbates this problem. If something is not done to reduce risk, we are passing on to succeeding generations a potentially insurmountable challenge.
 - Since Katrina, the nation has begun to move from a fix on controlling floods to recognition that absolute protection against these natural hazards is not possible. Our efforts must be focused on identifying our risks and developing and implementing a portfolio of approaches to deal with these risks, when such action is justified and feasible – flood risk management. In spite of the continuing tension between development and flood risk management, limited steps have been taken and progress has been made in some communities across the country to reduce and more effectively deal with flood risk. Awareness by the public also has increased, especially in light of recent catastrophic flooding events. Now is the time to accelerate progress and move aggressively forward to address these challenges in flood risk management.

Ignoring the challenge will not cause it to go away. America is a compassionate nation and we will respond to citizens in crisis. How we act now will mean the difference between proactively minimizing the impacts of potentially life changing events – building resilience, versus reactively recovering from catastrophic events and failing to heed the lessons we have learned. A failure to act today will have enormous future consequences. The call for action must once again be sounded!

Our congress program is ambitious. We will examine national and local policy imperatives, the means to enhance structural and economic resilience, and smart use and development. We will learn how to promote resiliency and we will develop a better understanding of the new economic and physical environment in which we now live.

We've gathered a group of the most qualified speakers to explore these topics with us. Together, all of us – speakers and attendees – represent government, industry, NGOs, scientific societies, and academia. It's essential that this broad scientific community be part of the conversation about the future of our nation's coasts.