

## New Jersey Office of Climate Resilience

### Introduction

In 2019, New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy signed [Executive Order No. 89](#), establishing a Chief Resilience Officer (CRO) and Climate and Flood Resilience Program. This program evolved into the Office of Climate Resilience, which provides communities with resilience planning and technical assistance to prepare for the impacts of extreme weather events like flooding.

The program also promotes public awareness of changing weather patterns. As a part of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP), the Office of Climate Resilience coordinates its activities with NJDEP's broader policies, programs, and activities. New Jersey can coordinate statewide resilience efforts, especially related to flooding, because it has an office dedicated to planning for shifting weather events.

### The challenge

After Hurricane Sandy caused \$30 billion in damages across New Jersey alone, Governor Murphy saw the need for a statewide strategy for building resilience to extreme weather, with a specific program on flood resilience. Intent on strengthening the state's resilience to increasingly intense storms and rising seas, he signed the executive order to create the CRO and the predecessor to the Office of Climate Resilience.

The sea level along New Jersey's shoreline is projected to [rise up to two and a half feet](#) by 2030. The state will likely experience [changing weather patterns](#) — including increased precipitation, faster snowmelt, and heightened evaporation — that will create greater flood risk in winter and spring. This risk can take the form of substantial erosion on the shoreline and the barrier islands, disappearance of aquatic ecosystems, intrusion of saltwater, damage to homes and infrastructure, decreased crop yields, and danger to human lives. The New Jersey CRO and the Office of Climate Resilience prepare the state to address these risks.

### Design of the Office of Climate Resilience

New Jersey's model to address statewide flooding includes an Office of Climate Resilience in NJDEP and a CRO to coordinate resilience strategies. The New Jersey CRO, appointed by the commissioner of the NJDEP, develops resilience policy, coordinates the implementation of the [New Jersey Climate Change Resilience Strategy](#), acts as vice chair of the Interagency Council on Climate Resilience Strategy, and delivers technical assistance to local governments.

The [CRO](#) currently oversees 32 staff within the Office of Climate Resilience,<sup>1</sup> with particular responsibilities over the Blue Acres buyout program and the Coastal Management

1 As of February 2024.

Program. The CRO also represents the NJDEP commissioner on the State Planning Commission, charged with advocating for the prioritization of resilience, protection of natural resources, and strengthening of infrastructure.

## Key programs

The Office of Climate Resilience promotes long-term adaptation and resilience to protect New Jersey's economy, communities, infrastructure, and natural resources. It carries out its role under four focus areas: Resilient Communities, Coastal Management, Blue Acres, and Statewide Policy Coordination.

### *Regional program for resilient communities*

The Office of Climate Resilience leads [Resilient NJ](#), New Jersey's foremost resilience planning program, which uses scientific projections and technical assistance to support local and regional climate planning. The program provides local governments with diverse consultant teams to develop a resilience action plan based on the community's vision for how they will respond to climate risks. Resilient NJ also supports local adaptation planning, including application assistance for federal grants, community education, and informational planning documents.

### *Coastal management*

The [Coastal Management Program](#) is a partnership between NJDEP and NOAA that addresses coastal issues experienced by New Jersey's 239 communities. The Office of Climate Resilience and a network of offices in NJDEP administer this program, including offices responsible for coastal permitting, coastal engineering, wetlands, dredging, science, and water quality. The CRO is also the program's coastal manager.

### *Post-disaster housing assistance*

The Office of Climate Resilience's [Blue Acres](#) is a voluntary buyout program for residents with homes damaged by floods. Blue Acres is a [nationally recognized](#) best practice for flood buyouts. The program not only emphasizes respect and continuity throughout the buyout and relocation process but also identifies ways to restore value to the land for each community. Blue Acres chooses land for acquisition that has already flooded or is likely to flood again. Blue Acres also acquires land that protects other areas from flooding.

Additionally, New Jersey residents benefit from Interagency collaboration between the Office of Climate Resilience and other departments. The NJ Department of Community Affairs' [Smart Move](#) program supports residents seeking affordable housing after a disaster. The program prioritizes participants in the Blue Acres buyout program and offers discounted prices to homebuyers and up to 20% assistance with down payments.

## Cost and funding

To operate its programs, the Office of Climate Resilience primarily administers funding from both federal and state government sources:

1. In the last several years, Resilient NJ has used \$3 million in state funds and over \$22 million in federal funds to support local governments, through grants like the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Community Development Block Grant for Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR), National Fish & Wildlife Foundation Coastal Resilience Fund, and an annual NOAA Coastal Zone Management award.
2. Federal and state sources fund Blue Acres, with approximately \$50 million from FEMA's Swift Current Flood Mitigation Assistance Grant Program and Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, \$34 million from HUD CDBG-DR, and an annual \$10 million from the [NJ Garden State Preservation Trust](#).

## Collaboration with state and local governments

The CRO serves as the vice chair of the Interagency Council on Climate Resilience, which strengthens collaboration on resilience across state departments and agencies. The Office of Climate Resilience staffs the council as well. The council primarily coordinates resilience goals between state agencies to develop statewide policies and standards and to establish short and long-term action plans for agencies to accomplish. It compiles strategies in the NJ Climate Change Resilience Strategy.

One such example of collaboration is between the Office of Climate Resilience and the Department of Community Affairs, which focused on improving post-disaster recovery and access to affordable housing. For more on New Jersey's collaboration on resilience, read the state's [Two-Year Anniversary Accomplishments](#) report.

The Office of Climate Resilience also develops the following tools and guidance for local governments, particularly related to resilience planning and nature-based projects:

- The first step in New Jersey's adaptation plan, [NJ Climate Change Resilience Strategy](#), includes priorities for building resilience, as well as specific ways the state can achieve its goals.
- Resilient NJ's [Local Planning for Climate Change Toolkit](#) provides guidance for local governments to build resilience without state funding, and its [Local Options and Local Actions](#) offers a series of case studies for community resilience.
- The Office of Climate Resilience provides community-specific climate vulnerability analyses and recommendations, scientific information, case studies, and best practices for coastal communities, shoreline, and landscapes. These educational tools include [Building Ecological Solutions to Coastal Community Hazards](#), [Eco-shorelines on Developed Coasts](#), and [Creating Flood Resilient Landscapes](#).

- Rutgers University’s [A Seat at the Table](#), developed for NJDEP, provides recommendations for incorporating the needs of socially vulnerable populations into coastal resilience planning.
- [Community Based Arts Grant Program](#) — collaboration between NJDEP, the Coastal Management Program, and the NJ Council on the Arts — creates art installations that communicate climate risks and provide information for communities to anticipate future changes.

## Impact

The NJ Climate Change Resilience Strategy establishes six priorities for building resilience, each with key outcomes and actionable steps for achieving progress:

1. Build resilient and healthy communities.
2. Strengthen the resilience of New Jersey’s ecosystems.
3. Promote coordinated governance.
4. Invest in information and increase public understanding.
5. Promote climate-informed investments and innovative financing.
6. Drive coastal resilience planning.

The strategy includes suggestions for local, state, and federal governments, and it highlights ways to give voices to underserved communities. And with its Two-Year Anniversary Accomplishments report, based on each of the strategy’s priorities, the Interagency Council on Climate Resilience makes tracking New Jersey’s progress simple.<sup>2</sup> The report highlights flood solutions, including the expansion of the Resilient NJ program and the modernization of flood hazard data through the Inland Flood Protection Rules.

The Office of Climate Resilience has made recent progress with Resilient NJ, funding resilience planning projects in 44 municipalities throughout New Jersey.<sup>3</sup> The program began with only four projects and is still expanding. Some regions participating in Resilient NJ have received benefits from both the state and federal governments.

One of Resilient NJ’s four regional-level projects is [Resilient Northeastern New Jersey](#).<sup>4</sup> Local and state leaders, technical experts, and others formed a resilience action plan for the region, which identifies ways to increase resilience against hazards like flooding. [Newark](#) and [Hoboken](#) — two of the four cities addressed in the plan — received Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) grant awards from FEMA in 2023.

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<sup>2</sup> As of October 2023.

<sup>3</sup> As of October 2023.

<sup>4</sup> As of February 2024.

## Key takeaways

New Jersey's resilience office sits within a state agency and has a CRO to coordinate resilience strategies within the office and across agencies. This model enables the state to steadily build flood resilience. States wishing to replicate New Jersey's model should consider these takeaways:

### *Empower a leader to mobilize the state around resilience objectives*

New Jersey's current CRO can mobilize resources to build statewide resilience through the Office of Climate Resilience's Blue Acres program. Blue Acres has purchased [over 1,000 flood-prone homes](#). A permanent staff works with citizens to account for the personal and emotional toll of leaving a home. The staff allow the program to run continuously, even when the state is not actively recovering from a disaster. States wishing to replicate impactful resilience programs should consider empowering a leader to guide the priorities of such programs, while employing a permanent staff that ensures consistency amid variable weather events and politics.

### *Position the leader to most effectively use available resources*

Under Executive Order No. 89, the NJDEP commissioner appoints the CRO, and the department provides the CRO with a permanent staff. With a strategic appointment process, the New Jersey CRO has the staffing resources to carry out programs to address flooding, both in the Office of Climate Resilience and through the activities of the Interagency Council. States should prioritize strategies that position resilience leaders to most effectively use available resources.

### *Coordinate across state agencies*

The Interagency Council on Climate Resilience is a space for collaboration between state agencies to achieve resilience objectives. With a CRO who is also the Vice-Chair to this council, the state can align priorities between state agencies and the Office of Climate Resilience. Since the onset of the council, New Jersey has prioritized flood resilience in many agencies, while encouraging collaboration.

States can replicate this organization by establishing a collaborative body that focuses on interagency work. Although New Jersey's Interagency Council holds meetings that are closed to the public, states may consider hosting open-door convenings that incorporate elected officials and local community members. With open conversations, agencies are more incentivized to follow through on implementation. This interagency body can be a starting point for states to understand flood risk, top priorities, and achievement of outcomes.