November 19, 2013

The Honorable Barbara Boxer
Chairman, Senate Committee on
Environment and Public Works

Honorable Bob Gibbs
Chairman, House Water Resources and
Environment Subcommittee

The Honorable David Vitter
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on
Environment and Public Works

Honorable Tim Bishop
Ranking Member, House Water Resources
and Environment Subcommittee

Honorable Bill Shuster
Chairman, House Committee on
Transportation and Infrastructure

Honorable Max Baucus
Chairman, Senate Transportation and
Infrastructure Subcommittee

Honorable Nick Rahall
Ranking Member, House Committee on
Transportation, and Infrastructure

Honorable John Barasso
Ranking Member, Senate Transportation and
Infrastructure Subcommittee

Dear Senators and Representatives,

On behalf of the American Society of Civil Engineers, the Association of State Dam Safety Officials, the Association of State Floodplain Managers, the Interstate Council on Water Policy, the National Association of Flood and Stormwater Management Agencies, and the United States Society of Dams, we appreciate your leadership in the successful passage of the Senate Water Resources Development Act and House Water Resources Reform and Development Act. As the first major water resources legislation since 2007, this legislation presents important opportunities to support nonfederal efforts to reduce the costs of future flood disasters.
As you move toward a Conference Report on the bills, we urge inclusion of a comprehensive levee safety program. Each of our organizations have public safety as an integral mission focus and our members are the Federal government’s partners in the identification and reduction of flood risk, including challenges associated with levees. We are well aware of the potentially devastating impacts that levee failures can have and urge you to take a comprehensive approach to address the nation's levee safety needs.

The Congress recognized in the Water Resources Development Act of 2007 that a coordinated, nationwide effort is needed to identify and reduce the risk of loss of life and property in levee-related flood events. Levee safety deserves a priority focus within national infrastructure needs. A levee risk management program is a long overdue investment needed to reduce the costs of future levee-related flood disasters. This investment will move the country away from a reactive, persistent and expensive disaster assistance environment to a less costly, proactive, safety-oriented culture where the general public and governments are informed and participate in effective risk management. State and local investment continues to increase, and federal support must sustain its leadership.

In January 2009, the National Committee on Levee Safety (established in WRDA 2007) presented its findings and recommendations to Congress and the Office on Management and Budget for a National Levee Safety Program that recognizes the need to address risks associated with levees and the communities that depend on their protection. Since delivery of that report, floods have continued to test flood damage reduction structures in settings both riverine and coastal, disrupting lives and economies, and serving as reminders that significant uncertainties and challenges remain more than seven years after the devastating flood events of 2005.

We are writing to draw your attention to a key opportunity that a new WRDA presents and to encourage the Conference Committee to include the creation of a comprehensive National Levee Safety Program in the new WRDA or WRRDA as part of the Federal response to large disasters and continued challenges with levees throughout the nation. We particularly note the following needs:

- Completion and expansion of the National Levee Inventory to include non-federal structures.
- Creation of a National Levee Safety Advisory Board to develop safety guidelines and guide the development of State and Regional Levee Safety Programs nationwide.
- Creation of the Levee Rehabilitation Assistance Program to address nonfederal issues to reduce risks that includes critical flood risk management and capability criteria guiding the award of funds under this program.
Our organizations recommend these elements for inclusion in the water resources legislation Conference Report. These provisions will significantly improve our nation’s capacity to manage flood risk and help reduce the costs of future flood disasters. They will reinforce the effective roles of each level of government in reducing flood risk and managing water resources. If we can provide additional information, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

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On behalf of non-federal members of USSD.