United States Senate
COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510–6175

December 4, 2017

The Honorable Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
Government Accountability Office
441 G St., NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

We request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) undertake a study on the risks to human health and the environment posed by natural disasters' impacts on Superfund sites and evaluate what federal actions may be taken to reduce those risks.

The United States has seen a steady increase in both the frequency and destructive force from natural disasters over the last several decades. Many of these increases are being exacerbated by the effects of climate change. For example, according to the U.S. Global Change Research Program's 2017 Climate Science Special Report for the Fourth National Climate Assessment, global sea level has risen by about 8 inches since 1900, is projected to rise another 1 to 4 feet by 2100, and could reach as high as 8 feet.[1] Sea level rise will increase the frequency and extent of extreme flooding associated with coastal storms. The Special Report also found that the frequency and intensity of heavy precipitation events in the United States are projected to continue to increase over the 21st century, resulting in the potential for increased flooding. Along the coasts, strong hurricanes bring not only intense precipitation, but also damaging winds and storm surge, as seen during Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Sandy, and most recently during Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria.

The Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Superfund program, authorized by the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act of 1980, as amended, is the federal government's principal program to clean up commercial and industrial hazardous waste sites. According to the EPA, remediation efforts at contaminated sites may be vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, such as rising sea levels and increased inland flooding due to increased heavy precipitation events.[3] There are over 1,700 sites on the National Priorities List (NPL), with 1,337 labeled as active as of March 2017.[4] Importantly, many active sites are located along the coast or in floodplains, and are likely to be affected by sea level rise and extreme weather events.

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[1] Wuebbles, and et al., 2017: Climate Science Special Report: Fourth National Climate Assessment, Volume I. U.S. Global Change Research Program (Washington, D.C.: November 2017).
[3] https://www.epa.gov/superfund/superfund-climate-change-adaptation
[4] https://www.epa.gov/superfund/npl-site-totals-status-and-milestone

In this context, we would like GAO to examine the following questions:

1. What is currently known about the number and types of Superfund sites that may be impacted by various natural disasters? Which of these are likely to be affected by extreme weather, local flooding, sea level rise, or other climate change-driven changes?

2. What is known about the health risks posed by sites that could be affected by sea level rise, storm surges, high tides, and inland flooding due to extreme storm events where cleanup is ongoing or complete?

3. How, if at all, is the EPA's Superfund program assessing, managing, and reducing these risks? How, if at all, are these risks being communicated to the public?

4. In a 2015 report, the GAO found that the decline in annual federal appropriations between 1999 and 2013 has caused the EPA to delay remedial actions to cleanup NPL sites. What impact, if any, has the reduction in federal funding had on EPA's ability to address the threat natural disasters pose to Superfund sites?

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Superfund, Waste Management, and Regulatory Oversight

Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Clean Air and Nuclear Safety

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United States Senator
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Committee on Environment and Public Works

Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator
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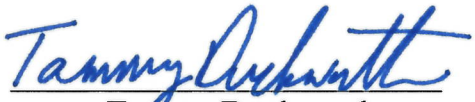
Subcommittee on Transportation and Infrastructure



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United States Senator
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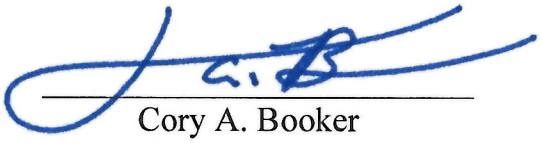

Cory A. Booker
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