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N.J. has taken bold action to address flooding. But there is more to do | Opinion

Updated: Jun. 27, 2024, 2:25 p.m. | Published: Jun. 27, 2024, 7:00 a.m.

5–6 minutes

[Emotional cleanup of flood damaged homes begins for residents of the Lost Valley in Manville](#)

By Jim Waltman

For too long, New Jersey’s environmental protection rules have looked backwards, seeking to protect the state’s residents and environment from events that occurred in the past, rather than attempting to address issues that are anticipated in the future. Solutions that only address yesterday’s problems will fail to meet tomorrow’s challenges.

Nowhere is this truer than with climate change, which most scientists agree is resulting in larger storm events and more flooding in our state -- trends that are expected to continue.

Four years ago, Gov. Phil Murphy made a bold commitment to modify the Department of Environmental Protection’s regulatory and permitting programs to better prepare our state for projected changes to sea level, precipitation, flooding, and other manifestations of climate change. It came through a program

called NJ PACT, or [Protecting Against Climate Threats](#).

NJDEP took an important step towards fulfilling NJ PACT last summer, with the adoption of the Inland Flood Protection Rule – which places [stronger restrictions](#) on where builders can locate new developments and raises standards for mitigating stormwater runoff from such projects.

But that was merely the first critical step. Conditions demand that we fortify the guardrails for development this summer, and the longer we wait to act, the more we put lives and communities at risk.

In May, Gov. Murphy and the DEP announced another bold action to make New Jersey more resilient to the anticipated impacts of climate change by proposing REAL -- [the Resilient Environments and Landscapes Rule](#). The goal is to use the best available science to anticipate future conditions, so that we can avoid many millions of dollars in property damage, destroyed businesses, and loss of life.

The proposed rule will increase safeguards for communities along the coast by acknowledging sea level rise – particularly the rise anticipated over the rest of the century. REAL also adds restrictions on how development can occur in such areas, and require that we take additional measures to reduce the threat to life and property.

Critically, the rule will also require that we begin to address the stormwater runoff and flooding created throughout New Jersey from hundreds of years of development that occurred in the state before there were any requirements to mitigate runoff. In fact, until the 1980s, most developments had no measures to address the

polluted stormwater runoff that they were created, which resulted in increasing flooding problems and water pollution.

Major new developments in New Jersey are required to incorporate stormwater mitigation measures to limit the extent to which such projects make our flooding and water pollution problems worse.

But currently, when a previously developed site is converted into a new use through redevelopment, modern stormwater management strategies are rarely implemented. In fact, many redevelopment projects are effectively exempted from our stormwater mitigation rules.

One of the best ways to reduce our existing flooding and water pollution problems -- and those anticipated in the future -- is to require that stormwater mitigation measures are incorporated into all development projects, whether they involve new construction on currently undeveloped properties or redevelopment of previously developed sites.

REAL would begin to address the redevelopment loophole, and ensure that redevelopments are equipped with measures that manage runoff better than the developments they replace.

But the new rule has yet to be published in the New Jersey Register, and adoption could be delayed – at our peril.

Climate change already has taken a devastating financial and human toll on our state. The DEP cites a Moody's Investors Service study that found flooding and storms have cost nearly 6% of the state's gross domestic product in damages since 1980. And we must never forget the 39 people who lost their lives during [Hurricane Ida](#).

The proposed REAL Rule is an important step towards protecting New Jersey's residents and environment from the serious threat of climate change.

It is critical that the rules be adopted as soon as possible. With flooding damage escalating each year, we cannot afford to wait.

Jim Waltman is the Executive Director of [The Watershed Institute](#), a non-profit dedicated to keeping New Jersey's water clean, safe and healthy since 1949. The institute protects and restores water and the environment through conservation, advocacy, science, and education.

