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ONE HUNDRED THIRTEENTH CONGRESS

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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February 14, 2013

The Honorable Darrell E. Issa  
Chairman  
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Today, the Comptroller General and the nonpartisan experts at the Government Accountability Office (GAO) have made a landmark decision to add the issue of climate change to their biannual High Risk report, which details the most pressing challenges facing our nation and the federal government.<sup>1</sup>

In its report, GAO warns that climate change is real, its impacts are already being felt, and its consequences will be devastating if we continue to ignore it. GAO finds that climate change poses particularly significant financial risks to our nation's economy, including agriculture, infrastructure, ecosystems, and human health. GAO warns that our government "is not well positioned to address this fiscal exposure," and GAO recommends a "government-wide strategic approach with strong leadership and the authority to manage climate change risks."

I am writing today to request that the Oversight Committee hold a series of hearings on GAO's report and the four components of climate change effects that GAO highlights:

- **Property and lands owned by the federal government.** In its report, GAO warns that federal buildings and infrastructure are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of climate change. The Department of Defense reports that "more than 30 U.S. military installations were already facing elevated levels of risk from rising sea levels." The Department of Transportation estimates that a rise in sea levels of four feet would adversely affect nearly three-quarters of all port facilities. Federal agencies also manage more than 600 million acres of land and 150,000 square miles of protected waters, all of which are vulnerable to a wide range of negative effects from climate change.

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<sup>1</sup> Government Accountability Office, *High Risk-Series: An Update* (Feb. 14, 2013) (GAO-13-283) (online at [www.gao.gov](http://www.gao.gov)).

- **Federal insurance programs.** The two largest federal insurance programs—the national flood and crop insurance programs—represent major expenditures for the federal government. Last year, crop insurance is estimated to have cost American taxpayers a record \$16 billion dollars. The costs of the flood insurance program for Hurricane Sandy alone could reach \$7 billion. In 2007, GAO recommended that the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Homeland Security analyze the long-term fiscal implications of climate change for these programs and report their findings to Congress. According to GAO, the agencies obtained experts to conduct this analysis, but the results have not been shared with Congress.
- **Federal disaster aid.** According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, over the past two years, the United States experienced 25 weather disasters that cost over a billion each. The frequency and intensity of weather-related disasters are likely to increase due to climate change, and according to GAO, “the federal government does not budget for these costs and runs the risk of facing a large fiscal exposure at any time.”
- **Federal technical assistance to state and local governments.** GAO warns that billions of dollars invested by the federal government in infrastructure for state and local governments is at risk without better information on climate change impacts for state and local governments. In its report, GAO highlights work by the United States Global Change Research Program to improve the coordination and sharing of federal climate science.

With our Committee’s extremely wide jurisdiction across multiple federal agencies and departments, we have a unique opportunity to conduct hearings that will lead to vigorous oversight, responsible funding decisions, and legislation to address the growing threats to public health and our economy.

When GAO issued its last High Risk report in 2011, you stated that it was our Committee’s obligation to conduct “vigorous oversight” over the issues raised by GAO and to insist on “plans for change by each of the agencies listed here today.”<sup>2</sup> I agree, and I stand ready to work with you and all Members of the Committee in a bipartisan manner to make that happen.

Sincerely,



Elijah E. Cummings  
Ranking Member

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<sup>2</sup> Government Accountability Office, *GAO High Risk Series Press Conference* (Feb. 16, 2011) (online at [www.gao.gov/docsearch/featured/highrisk.html](http://www.gao.gov/docsearch/featured/highrisk.html)).