1. Brief background about La Crosse

Thank you for the invitation to testify before this committee today. I feel honored to be here. I am Mayor Tim Kabat and I proudly represent the 52,000 citizens of the City of La Crosse, Wisconsin. People have lived in La Crosse and the surrounding region for centuries and have enjoyed the natural resources that the Mississippi River and its bluffs, wetlands, fisheries and forests provide.

Our community is home to three institutions of higher learning, two large health care systems, a robust and diverse economy and vibrant outdoor recreational opportunities. We are the center of a larger region including southeast Minnesota and northeast Iowa and our daytime population grows to more than 70,000 people who travel into our City to work, attend school, health care appointments and shop.

We are also blessed to be the home of the USGS Upper Midwest Environmental Sciences Center, the USFWS Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, and the USACE Lock and Dam Number Seven. These partners have enhanced water quality and native habitats through island building, river drawdowns and planting native species.

La Crosse is like other river communities as we have learned to live, work and play in the Mississippi River and its watershed. We are also like other communities in that we are experiencing significant challenges because of our changing climate and weather patterns. River flooding is no longer limited to the spring, but is happening year-round. Storm events are more severe and more frequent.

1. Data on floodplain properties, flood insurance

Approximately 13% (1,893) of La Crosse’s improved parcels (14,942) are located within the designated special flood hazard area. This includes 7.5% (1,924) of all structures (26,108) across the City. La Crosse participates in both the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) and the Community Rating System (CRS) to help reduce how much our homeowners pay in flood insurance.

La Crosse has around 700 flood insurance policies and property owners pay about $750,000 annually into the NFIP. Ninety percent (90%) of these policies are for Pre-FIRM structures. In La Crosse that means structures built before 1971.

La Crosse has seven (7) reaches of levees, totaling nearly five (5) miles in length (25,100 feet). Most of these were hastily constructed in 1965 to combat our flood of record. From 1989 to 1994 the City partnered with the USACE to construct the Pammel Creek flood control structure, a 2.6-mile concrete channel, which removed hundreds of homes from the floodplain designation.

1. Brief review of most recent storm events and river levels, recent damages and on-going concerns

La Crosse and our region have experienced our share of flooding with major events occurring in 2001 and 2007 and serious storms in 2010, 2017 and 2018. Our flood of record occurred in 1965, when the river reached 17.9 feet at Riverside Park. Although a few weeks remain in 2019, we have already shattered records for the highest average April river stage, the highest average May river stage, and the highest average October and November river stages this year alone.

Severe storm events in 2017 and 2018 caused millions of dollars in damage to private property and infrastructure including street and trail wash outs, the undermining of railroad tracks, collapsed water and sewer lines and private utilities. We are still working to recover from these events, including reimbursements from the Federal government.

The high river levels negatively impact barge shipments, our waste water treatment plant, causes delays for infrastructure projects and hurts tourism.

In our case, high river levels are connected to high groundwater. These groundwater levels are causing damage to our resident’s home foundations and basements. Parts of our community are still pumping groundwater out of their homes into our storm sewers. No one can remember a time when pumping was still happening in November and December.

1. Brief review of our floodplain management program, ideas for future

The City of La Crosse has actively managed our floodplain and the associated challenges for decades. During this time, La Crosse’s floodplain management program has evolved into a comprehensive strategy that seeks to assist individual homeowners, as well as complete larger neighborhood and City-wide improvements. Our goal is to remove homes and properties from the floodplain, improve the resiliency of our infrastructure, reduce street flooding and water in basements, and to enhance our levees, pumps and flood ditches and channels to protect us from high river levels.

A few examples of our local program include a City-funded elevation certificate program for property owners with on-line mapping resources and the floodplain relief program, which provides funds for homeowners to remove properties from the floodplain. This program was expanded to provide funds for homeowners to fill their basements to deal with high groundwater levels. The City also acquires homes in the floodplain, demolishes them, fills the property, obtains a LOMR and works with our private and non-profit partners like Habitat for Humanity to construct new homes on the sites.

We are working with the USACE and Wisconsin Emergency Management on a City-wide flood hazard mitigation plan to develop solutions and become eligible for additional federal and state grant funds. We received a $3.6 million U.S. EDA grant to replace temporary stormwater lift and pumping stations with permanent stations and to upgrade existing lift and pumping stations. We also implement a robust green complete streets program that includes stormwater management best practices, bioswales, retention and detention ponds and permeable pavement as part of our annual capital improvement program.

1. Key needs and partnership opportunities with Feds for prevention and response

We need stronger partnerships with our Federal agencies and greater flexibility in how resources are implemented on the ground.

We can use dollars and technical assistance to update and enhance our levee system. La Crosse’s levee network was constructed during our flood of record and not to USACE standards, thus we are ineligible for Federal funds. However, the levees are still doing their job and we could use assistance in enhancing these flood control structures.

We look forward to continued grant opportunities – such as the U.S. EDA funds to upgrade our temporary lift and pumping stations, and Pre-Disaster Mitigation funds to acquire homes and remove structures from the floodplain and floodways.

We would like the Feds to work with us on updated mapping and matching flood maps with actual rainfall and flooding events. We are going through a significant local expense to convince the State and Feds that the official maps in one of our floodplain areas should be consistent with the actual storm events we experienced in 2017.

We are asking for creativity and flexibility – one idea is to allow the locals to utilize a portion of the flood insurance premiums our residents pay for local prevention and pre-disaster mitigation projects.

We seek cost sharing to restore impacted waterways and connecting wetlands. In La Crosse, we could use resources to remove invasive species, improve water flow and water quality, increase flood storage capacity and restore native habitats to the 1,100-acre urban wetland that is in the heart of our City.

We also seek cost sharing to flood proof our residents’ homes, to fill in basements and raise property levels above the regional flood elevation.

We are still working to receive reimbursement from the 2017 and 2018 storm events.

In conclusion, we have a great community and want a closer working relationship with our Federal partners. We appreciate the significant role the Federal agencies provide in helping us prevent and recover from flooding and severe storm events. We look forward to strengthening this partnership.

Thank you.