

## United States Senate

April 21, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden:

Your decision to halt levee wall construction when you halted border wall construction has left hundreds of thousands of residents vulnerable in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV). We have heard from Hidalgo County officials and residents that as hurricane and flooding season soon approaches, the unfinished border wall levee system in Hidalgo County is a matter of urgent public safety. They have been emphatic—remediating the levee wall system should be an emergency priority.<sup>1</sup> We urge you to allow the RGV Border Patrol Sector to complete and reinforce the compromised and unfinished levee system in Hidalgo County immediately—a measure that is strongly supported by local residents and leaders across the political spectrum.<sup>2</sup>

In 2019, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) began construction on approximately 24 miles of levee wall system in Hidalgo County, Texas to protect against flood damage that plagues the region.<sup>3</sup> CBP partnered with the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to award a contract to build 11 miles of new levee system, and the levee system construction project was funded by CBP's Fiscal Year 2019 appropriation.<sup>4</sup> The levee design plans were approved by the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) and USACE.

Initially, in order to accommodate border wall construction, the levee system was modified. However, when your administration halted border wall construction this January, it also halted construction on the levee wall system in Hidalgo County, leaving that system not only unfinished but compromised. Currently, there are approximately 14 miles of work area in Hidalgo County that are either incomplete or compromised. This exposes residents to uncovered trenches, rebar,

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<sup>1</sup> Hidalgo County Pct 3. Officials Address Current Breach in Rio Grande River Levee, Valley Central (Apr. 14, 2021), <https://www.valleycentral.com/news/local-news/hidalgo-county-pct-3-officials-address-current-breach-in-rio-grande-river-levee/>.

<sup>2</sup> Sandra Sanchez, 'Dangerous' Levee Breaches Remain After Halt in Border Wall Construction, Local Officials Say, Valley Central (Apr. 14, 2021), <https://www.valleycentral.com/news/local-news/hidalgo-county-pct-3-officials-address-current-breach-in-rio-grande-river-levee/>.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Dep't of Homeland Security, FY19 Rio Grande Valley Levee/Border Wall System Construction Projects (June 2019), <https://www.cbp.gov/document/environmental-assessments/fy19-rio-grande-valley-leveeborder-wall-system-construction>.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

and construction materials. It also cuts off or limits many Hidalgo County residents', businesses', and irrigation districts' access to their property.

But the largest threat by far to public safety is the upcoming hurricane season. The RGV knows all too well the catastrophic effects of flooding. In June 2018, the Valley experienced a “great” flood.<sup>5</sup> Made vulnerable by its generally flat terrain and proximity to the warm gulf waters, the Valley experienced flash flooding precipitated by heavy tropical rainfall, leading to flooded streets and thousands of emergency rescues.<sup>6</sup> The flooding is estimated to have resulted in at least \$250 million of damage, including damage to over 20,000 Texan residences and businesses.<sup>7</sup> The RGV was struck again in June of 2019 with record-setting rainfall in certain areas.<sup>8</sup> Streets were again flooded, homes and businesses devastated. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, in response, committed \$240 million to the repair of homes, businesses, and infrastructure.<sup>9</sup> And last year, the RGV was hit with prolific rainfall, including up to 18 inches in some spots.<sup>10</sup>

While residents of the Rio Grande Valley have suffered through devastating tropical storms in recent years, this year's hurricane season is already shaping up to have busier tropical storm activity than normal. Hurricane expert, Dr. Philip Klotzbach of Colorado State University, released this year's seasonal hurricane forecast with a predicted 17 named storms, 8 hurricanes, and 4 major hurricanes for 2021—rates notably higher than the averages from 1981–2010.<sup>11</sup> Texas is expected to be hard-hit with a forecasted 75% chance of being impacted by a tropical storm, 49% chance of being hit by a hurricane, and a 21% chance of a major hurricane hitting the state.<sup>12</sup> These rates are considerably higher than the typical hurricane season rates in Texas of 58%, 35%, and 14% respectively.<sup>13</sup>

With a forecasted busy hurricane season fast-approaching, border wall levee construction must commence immediately in Hidalgo County. In response to the heightened flood risk this year, over 14 miles of the levee system need immediate remediation. The compromised levee poses severe

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<sup>5</sup> The Great June Flood in the RGV, National Weather Service, [https://www.weather.gov/bro/2018event\\_greatjunefflood](https://www.weather.gov/bro/2018event_greatjunefflood).

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> Great June Flood, The Sequel National Weather Service (June 24, 2019), [https://www.weather.gov/bro/2019event\\_june24fflood](https://www.weather.gov/bro/2019event_june24fflood).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Cappucci, Jason Samenow & Andrew Freedman, Hanna Hammers South Texas, Hit Hard By Coronavirus, with Flooding Rains, The Washington Post (July 26, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2020/07/26/hanna-south-texas/>.

<sup>11</sup> David Yeoman, Texas Hurricane Strike More Likely than Normal This Year, Kxan (Apr. 8, 2021) <https://www.kxan.com/weather/another-hyperactive-hurricane-season-expected-in-2021/>.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

risk to over 200,000 county residents once flooding begins. Simply put, the effects of hurricane season will be catastrophic in Hidalgo County if the levee system is not remediated.

Independent of the border wall's significant success in decreasing illegal immigration, shoring up the levee system will provide desperately needed safety and security to Americans in the Rio Grande Valley. Your administration should not allow its opposition to a border wall to prevent building a levee wall that is critical to the people of the Rio Grande Valley. We urge you to authorize the RGV Border Patrol Sector to immediately commence levee construction.

Sincerely,



Ted Cruz  
United States Senator