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AMERICANS BACK PREPARATION FOR EXTREME WEATHER AND SEA-LEVEL RISE

*Majority express support for stronger coastal development codes,
according to Stanford survey*

WASHINGTON, D.C. – March 28, 2013 – Images told the story: lower Manhattan in darkness, coastal communities washed away, cars floating in muck. Superstorm Sandy, a harbinger of future extreme weather intensified by climate change, caught the U.S. off guard this past October. Unprepared for the flooding and high winds that ensued, the East Coast suffered more than \$70 billion in property damages and more than 100 related deaths. Going forward, Americans face a stark choice: prepare and invest now to minimize the impact of disasters such as Sandy, or deal with storms and rising sea levels when they occur.

A new survey commissioned by the Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment and the Center for Ocean Solutions finds that an overwhelming majority of Americans want to prepare in order to minimize the damage likely to be caused by global warming-induced sea-level rise and storms. A majority also want people whose properties and businesses are located in hazard areas – not the government – to foot the bill for this preparation. Specifically, 82 percent of the Americans surveyed said that people and organizations should prepare for the damage likely to be caused by sea level rise and storms, rather than simply deal with the damage after it happens. Among the most popular policy solutions identified in the survey are strengthening building codes for how to build new structures along the coast to minimize damage (favored by 62 percent) and preventing new buildings from being built near the coast (supported by 51 percent).

“People support preventive action,” said survey director Jon Krosnick, a senior fellow at the Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment, “and few people believe these preparations will harm the economy or eliminate jobs. In fact, more people believe that preparation efforts will help the economy and create jobs around the U.S., in their state and in their town than think these efforts will harm the economy and result in fewer jobs in those areas. But people want coastal homeowners and businesses that locate in high-risk areas to pay for these measures.”

The challenges posed by rising sea levels and increasingly severe storms will only intensify as more Americans build along the coasts. A National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration report released March 25 predicts that already crowded U.S. coastlines will become home to an additional 11 million people by 2020.

Survey questions were formulated to assess participants’ beliefs about climate change and gathered opinions about the impact of climate change, sea-level rise, and storms on communities, the economy and jobs. The survey also gauged public support for specific coastal adaptation strategies and how to pay for them.

“People are least supportive of policies that try to hold back Mother Nature,” Krosnick said. “They think it makes more sense to recognize risk and reduce exposure.” Among the survey’s respondents, 48 percent favor sand dune restoration and 33 percent favor efforts to maintain beaches with sand replenishment, while 37 percent support relocating structures away from the coast and 33 percent support constructing sea walls.

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Eighty-two percent of the survey's respondents believe that the earth's temperature has been rising over the last 100 years. However, even a majority of those who doubt the existence of climate change favored adaptation measures (60 percent).

"The question is, how does public support for preparation translate to action?" asked Meg Caldwell, executive director of the Center for Ocean Solutions. "Our impulse is to try to move quickly to put communities back together the way they were after devastation. But that impulse often leads to doubling down on high-risk investments, such as rebuilding in areas likely to experience severe impacts. To move toward long-term resiliency for coastal communities, we need to seize opportunities to apply new thinking, new standards and long-term solutions."

Professor Krosnick presented the survey results this morning (March 28) at a Policy Briefing hosted by Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. The briefing was followed by a discussion about the implications of changing public attitudes with four panelists: Cas Holloway, deputy mayor for operations in New York City; Laurie McGilvray, chief of the Estuarine Reserves Division of the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration; Margaret Peloso, attorney with the international law firm of Vinson and Elkins LLP; and Carol Werner, executive director of the Environmental and Energy Study Institute. Videos of the presentation and the panel discussion will be available by 4 p.m. Eastern time/1 p.m. Pacific time on the Stanford Woods Institute website at woods.stanford.edu.

The survey was conducted via the Internet with a nationally representative probability sample of 1,174 American adults aged 18 and older, conducted by GfK Custom Research March 3 to 18, 2013. The survey was administered in both English and Spanish. The survey has a margin of error of +/- 4.9% at the 95 percent confidence level.

Bo MacInnis, a visiting scholar at Stanford University's Communication Department, was co-director of the study. Lauren Howe a graduate student in psychology at Stanford; Adina Abeles, director of education and training for the Stanford Center for Ocean Solutions; Ezra Markowitz, a post-doctoral fellow at Princeton University; and Robert Socolow, director of the Princeton University's Environmental Institute's Climate and Energy Challenge, contributed to the survey design and analysis process.

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