

A Better Normal: Post-COVID19 Recovery for a Climate Ready Hawai'i¹



The pandemic crisis highlights how vulnerable Hawai'i is to larger global forces—and why it is imperative to move quickly to a clean, equitable, and resilient future. The Climate Commission's three guiding principles of *clean, equitable and resilient* are offered here to help the government put into practice a fast, sustained recovery. By incorporating the guiding principles of the Commission into COVID19 recovery efforts we address present day health, economic and climate change impacts to prepare for the future. Here, we discuss specifically how investments in active transportation and solutions using nature can create jobs now, and why righting inequities are central to a new and better normal for a climate ready Hawai'i.

As Hawai'i orchestrates its emergence from the current pandemic's health, social and economic chaos, the State's Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Commission offers its assistance in recovery and resilience planning efforts. First and foremost, the Commission acknowledges the deep impact the current crisis is having on the health and well-being of Hawai'i's residents, especially on its frontline community members. The Commission feels its responsibility to provide assistance in guiding recovery, and offers insights and recommendations contained in this brief.

What would a recovery to a new and better normal look like? A better normal would embrace the Commission's three principles of *clean, equitable and resilient* to create a quick and sustained recovery for Hawai'i. The urgent focus on short-term needs is undeniable. However, the pandemic represents a crisis moment in Hawai'i's history, and when seized, such moments can lead to a new and better normal. For Hawai'i, wise investments can boost job creation in the

short-term and create longer term benefits of resiliency. Examples include energy efficiency retrofits for existing buildings; using nature-based solutions to reduce atmospheric carbon, increase food security, and prevent flooding and erosion; expansion of active transportation infrastructure, and more. The latter two are main focuses of the Commission's work and their nexus with COVID19 recovery are discussed here.

This brief supports and expands upon the work of local and national partners: UHERO's report on resuming economic activity², the State Commission on Status of Women's Report *Building Bridges, Not Walking on Backs*³, Smart Growth America's⁴ *Learning from the 2009 Recovery Act*, and the US Climate Alliance's green stimulus letter to Congress (forthcoming).

A #BetterNormal increases investment in active transportation to create the most jobs fastest, while addressing equity, resilience, and clean energy goals

Transit is a lifeline and must be bolstered and made better post-pandemic. Hawai'i's proportion of ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained and Employed) households is higher than the national average. Pre-COVID19, this number was 48% of Hawai'i's households;⁵ post-COVID19 this will only be higher. Transit use is highest among low income individuals, as might be expected.⁶ Nationwide and in Hawai'i, the people who staff our transit system, stock our grocery shelves, unload pallets, and work other minimum wage and low paying jobs need to especially be protected during times of crisis. Our interdependencies are more evident now than ever.

¹ Disclaimer: This draft document is authored by Anukriti.s.Hittle@Hawaii.gov for the Climate Commission's discussion on May 13, 2020. While many colleagues contributed their time and effort to this brief, ultimately the author is responsible for the content of this document. May 6, 2020.

² *How to Control Hawaii's Coronavirus Epidemic and Bring Back the Economy: The Next Steps*. Sumner La Croix and Tim Brown (April 2020) UHERO. Available at: <https://uhero.hawaii.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2020/04/HowToControlHawaiiCoronavirusEpidemic.pdf>

³ *Building Bridges for Gender Equality*. UNESCO (2019) Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/2019genderreport>

⁴ *Learning from the 2009 Recovery Act: Lessons and Recommendations for Infrastructure Stimulus*. Smart Growth America (April 2020).

Available at: <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/resources/learning-from-the-2009-recovery-act/>

⁵ *ALICE Fact Sheet* (2019) United Way, Available at: <https://www.auw.org/sites/default/files/pictures/AUW-ALICE%20Fact%20Sheet%20FINAL.PDF>

⁶ *Commuting Patterns in Hawaii*. Statistics Brief (2015) Hawaii State Department of Business, available at: http://files.hawaii.gov/dbedt/economic/data_reports/briefs/Commuting_Patterns_Apr2015.pdf

Returning to a “normal” where these essential workers are susceptible to homelessness and other systemic shocks should be unacceptable. It is critical to work with communities to decrease the systemic inequities, which will help us all become more resilient.

Investing in transit creates jobs faster and is a key to recovery. According to Smart Growth America, the infrastructure lessons from ARRA are clear:⁷

“If Congress wants to use infrastructure spending to create jobs and support recovery, we should learn from the previous stimulus. In the face of unprecedented unemployment, that means projects which: Create the most jobs, fastest; and connect people to as much economic opportunity as possible. That means public transit—especially operations and repair—and road repair.”

The Commission and its county partners can help advise on active transportation to create jobs fast, to make Hawai‘i more resilient and to address equity. This brief does not identify specific projects, or programs, as we are still in the process of gathering information. However, preliminary investigation has shown that counties have funding needs for already identified projects that amount to hundreds of millions of dollars for active transportation—from pedestrian-bike access for rail, to bike lanes, multi-modal transportation hubs and more. Keeping in mind that these would also generate more jobs (faster than other transportation projects) we venture to advise that this is an area where the Commission and its members can bring already identified active transportation projects to the economic recovery table.

Examples of project areas currently include but are not limited to the following, all of which effectively address equity, job creation and greenhouse gas reduction: Emergency Relief for Transit;⁸ build bike-pedestrian-transit infrastructure; build multimodal hubs to encourage use of active transportation, supported by

an enabling policy framework; instate statewide commute trip reduction and telework policies and incentives, supported by enabling policy framework; deploy public fleet electric vehicles for resilience and disaster relief, especially for ALICE and other frontline communities.⁹

_____A #BetterNormal keeps the wild, wild; increases investment in nature-based solutions to protect our beaches and natural lands, makes us more resilient, less carbon dependent, and creates jobs_____

An economic recovery must be closely tied with climate change impacts, which in turn must be intertwined with public health issues. Addressing these together will help us formulate a coherent response to disasters and protect against uncertain conditions. In short, “we are going to have to multitask on this one, as delay will cost lives and livelihoods.”¹⁰

According to the UN, a healthy planet means fewer diseases.¹¹ Seventy five percent of new and infectious diseases are zoonotic. Deforestation and alteration of habitat, along with wildlife trade, has brought humans and animals ever closer together. Nature-based solutions (NBS) provide the “multi-taskability” that is needed to conserve and restore the planet’s ecosystems and reduce carbon emissions, protect public health, create jobs and a stronger, diversified economy to make us more resilient to current and future disruptions.

In a “better normal”, we would protect our beaches and forests. The current pandemic and stay-at-home orders have highlighted just how important our beaches and natural lands are to Hawai‘i’s residents and visitors alike. This comes as no surprise; studies have documented how interactions with nature lead to a decrease in stress

⁷ *Learning from the 2009 Recovery Act: Lessons and Recommendations for Infrastructure Stimulus*. Smart Growth America (April 2020). Available at: <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/resources/learning-from-the-2009-recovery-act/>

⁸ FTA’s Emergency Relief program, established under MAP-21 legislation, enables FTA to provide assistance to public transit operators in the aftermath of an emergency or major disaster. See: <https://www.transit.dot.gov/funding/grant-programs/emergency-relief-program>.

⁹ See similar concept here “Nissan Leaf restores power to 7-Eleven stores to prep for disasters in Japan”. Bradley Berman. Electrek (March 2020) Available at: <https://electrek.co/2020/03/26/nissan-leaf-restores-power-to-7-eleven-stores-to-prep-for-disasters-in-japan/>

¹⁰ “Key Investments Can Build Resilience to Pandemics and Climate Change”. Leonardo Martinez-Diaz and Lauren Sidner. World Resources Institute (April 2020) Available at: <https://www.wri.org/blog/2020/04/coronavirus-pandemic-climate-change-investments>

¹¹ “First Person: COVID-19 is not a silver lining for the climate, says UN Environment chief”. Joao Roberto Ripper. *UN News* (April 2020) Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061082>

levels in human beings.¹² The need for a greener Hawai'i is undeniable.

For recovery, there are many reasons to consider NBS in the protection of Hawai'i's much coveted beaches. The use of *lo'i* (taro fields), aquaculture, fish ponds and other coastal features not only provide resilience to flooding, coastal erosion and reef protection, but are rooted in traditional practice and knowledge, providing livelihoods, sustenance and spiritual well-being to many local and native families. Such solutions are highly relevant for an archipelagic state like Hawai'i.

NBS, through forest and agriculture expansion, could play a strong role in redefining the visitor industry model in Hawai'i. As visitor numbers have grown more rapidly than visitor spending and resident support for tourism has waned in recent years, Hawai'i needs to look at a different business model for recovery and resiliency. By charging fees to offset air travel emissions, Hawaii could potentially see more revenue, fewer visitors, less pressure on the resources, and more clean jobs.

The Commission and its partners can help mobilize and coordinate the creation of jobs in Hawai'i's forests and coastal areas. According to a USGS model, expanding the footprint of Hawai'i's forests has the potential to sequester an additional 4 million tons of carbon from the atmosphere. This could provide hundreds of additional jobs. Examples of project areas include, but are not limited to: Incentives programs for carbon offsets to allow small landholders to participate; protection of existing wildlands and consequent need to expand hiring for these; scaling up tree planting; improving local food systems both inland and coastal; designing and construction of green-gray coastal infrastructure to address beach erosion and related inland flooding. All of these have job creation potential, many are shovel ready, and they address impacts of climate change being felt today, recovery in the short- and long-term, and make Hawai'i resilient to the next pandemic or natural disaster.

A #BetterNormal includes a broad-based inclusive process for recovery, to create equity, resilience and strength

Low and moderate income (LMI) communities, women, and frontline workers are disproportionately and more acutely affected by the pandemic. The novel coronavirus pandemic will result in an additional 1.5 million U.S. households becoming extremely low-income.¹³ For Hawai'i, where 48% of households are already ALICE households, the pandemic's aftermath will only make things worse. The *Building Bridges* Report makes the case that:

“...at this time, the voices of those most impacted by COVID-19, including women, girls, femme-identified and nonbinary people, racialized women/women of color and Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander and immigrant women in Hawai'i, are largely missing from the discussions on COVID-19 recovery planning. Those experiencing the structural inequalities that lead to poor health, will feel the health, economic and social costs of COVID-19 the hardest and will have the least ability to “recover.”

We align with this Report, and others such as the Evergreen Action Plan, to including Hawai'i's frontline, LMI, indigenous and vulnerable communities that are “first and worst” hit by disruptions, whether economic, environmental or health.¹⁴

The Commission and its members can assist in forming channels for participation, and providing a process and framework for equity, that can be used in recovery and beyond.

One of the lessons from ARRA, as reported by the U.S. EPA, was how challenging it was to move the funds, and how critical partnerships were to the process.¹⁵ It is crucial we work together with our communities to frame

¹² “The physiological effects of Shinrin-yoku (taking in the forest atmosphere or forest bathing): evidence from field experiments in 24 forests across Japan.” Bum Jin Park et al. (2010) *Environmental Health and Preventative Medicine*, 15(1): page 18.

¹³ National Low-Income Housing Coalition President and CEO Diane Yentel on a recent National League of Cities (NLC) webinar. See “1.5 million households to become extremely low-income due to COVID-19”. Cailin Crowe (2020) *Smart Cities Dive*. Available at: <https://www.smartcitiesdive.com/news/coronavirus-affordable-housing-crisis-homeless-national-league-of-cities-webinar/576040/>

¹⁴ “Evergreen Action Plan”. Sam Ricketts (April 2020) *Medium*. Available at: <https://medium.com/@sam.t.ricketts/evergreen-action-plan-3f705ecb500a>

¹⁵ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) & Major Partners' Lessons Learned from Implementing EPA's Portion of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act: Factors Affecting Implementation and Program Success. U.S. EPA (September 2013) Available at: <https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2015-09/documents/lessons-learned-arra-six-report-summary.pdf>

and develop this process, including one that will move recovery funds quickly and effectively to those they were meant to help. There already exists an expanding socio-ecological infrastructure of high caliber local, 'āina-based, innovative, creative and technological expertise that could help in formulating a just and resilient future.

Recommendation: While there are many projects that would address equity needs, our main recommendation is to develop a statewide climate and social vulnerability index for all programs and projects in the state, so that there is a common basis for all future action related to recovery and resiliency. Such an index would incorporate future and current climate change impacts, environmental health risks, gender and socioeconomic data and adaptive capacity, and needs to be developed for statewide recovery now. It would ground COVID19 economic recovery initiatives within truly resilient outcomes, help co-create additional tools and methods for integrating equity into each agency and department; and provide a community-driven process, framework, best-practices and language to effectively communicate the structural inequities being experienced, that can then be scaled and adapted to organizational metrics that are specific to COVID19 recovery needs.

Build a Better Normal for a Clean, Equitable and Resilient Hawai'i—Together

In a few short weeks, life has transformed in Hawai'i, revealing major systemic flaws and inequities that compromise the sustainability and well-being of all who live here. Visitor arrivals have declined from 30,000 a day to 500 or so. Highlighting its over-dependence on tourism, Hawai'i has gone from having lower-than-national average unemployment, to the highest in the nation. By mid-April, unemployment was up to 37 percent, as tourism closures continued to force Hawai'i's businesses to shutdown.¹⁶ And while emissions are

down because all economic activity has slowed, this is not a welcome nor long-term sustainable outcome for anyone.

The government has established a team to conduct the Hawai'i Economic and Community Recovery and Resiliency Plan that will address the challenge.¹⁷ The Climate Change Commission urges, as an independent advisory body to the government, that climate change solutions be used in rising to the challenge of recovery and preparedness. Smart investment decisions now can create better jobs, a more prepared Hawai'i, and reduce Hawai'i's exposure to climate impacts and natural disasters. On the other hand, locking Hawai'i into a high-emissions path will only increase vulnerability and risk to future events, and expose Hawai'i to more instability.

Experts support the view that the COVID19 situation is a harbinger of more to come. Like climate change impacts, it knows no boundaries, and is in the interests of everyone to address. The current crisis highlights that limits to growth are essential—not only for the climate “externalities” the system produces, but for a myriad of other ills such as inequity. It also makes the painfully obvious connection of zoonotic disease prevalence through deforestation and mining that fuel such limitless economic growth.

There is no doubt but that we have to build back better. And to do so, we need to work with more, varied and representative stakeholders and their communities. The Climate Commission can help with Hawai'i's recovery, because its priorities and broad guiding principles are inextricably woven with those of the state's well-being—not only for its people, but also the natural systems on which they depend. And so, it can help bring that much-needed essential equilibrium to the recovery and resilience process in Hawai'i.

¹⁶ “Unemployment in Hawaii Tops 37% as Coronavirus Shutdown Continues”. Lynn Kawano (April 2020) *Hawaii News Now*. Available at: <https://www.hawaiinewsnow.com/2020/04/16/unemployment-hawaii-tops-coronavirus-shutdown-continues/>

¹⁷ Governor Ige Appoints Alan. M. Oshima to Lead Hawai'i's Economic and Community Recovery” (April 2020) Press Release, Office of the Governor of Hawaii. Available at: <https://governor.gov/newsroom/latest-news/office-of-the-governor-governor-ige-appoints-alan-m-oshima-to-lead-hawaiis-economic-and-community-recovery-resiliency-efforts/>

