



# Coalition to Mitigate the Impacts of Sea Level Rise

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Mr. Dean Uchida  
Director, Department of Planning and Permitting  
City and County of Honolulu  
650 S. King Street  
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813

May 23, 2022

Dear Mr. Uchida:

We greatly appreciate, at the Mayor's request, your May 5<sup>th</sup> comprehensive response to our letter of April 13 in which we requested that permitting be halted in the 4-foot sea level rise zone as indicated on the attached NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration - U.S. Department of Commerce) SLR map document, along with planning for a managed retreat that is expected to be happening within the next thirty years.

We are aware of the well-researched coastal zone policies you stated that guide the permitting process, and appreciate the additional information provided that clearly indicates that the permitting process acknowledges that Climate Change and sea level rise are facts that we must face sooner or later. However, these coastal zone policies were initially prepared more than five years ago and were to act as future planning guidelines, as there was still the belief that the looming Climate Change crisis—and with it sea level rise— could still be managed if our country would step up and assume a leadership role in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. But we all must acknowledge now that our country instead took steps backward and that droughts, food scarcity, unstoppable wildfires, hurricanes, subsidence, and overall unpredictable weather changes are just the precursors of accelerating sea level rise.

This also paints a picture of the difficult position the Department finds itself in today and does not provide answers to our question: **GIVEN JUST THESE FACTS, why are permits still being issued for construction everywhere, inclusive of high-rises, as if Climate Change and sea level rise were a myth?**

Dr. Fletcher of UH, in his May 6, 2022 interview as published in the *Honolulu Star Advertiser* (attached), provides factual answers to the questions we raised in our letter of April 13. He states that global sea level rise has become irreversible even if we stop greenhouse emissions today, and that moving away from shorelines is irreversible. He further states that sea level rise is such a game change that it is probably worth a total rethink of the local, state, and national coastal zone policies (you had stated in your letter).

He further points out that groundwater inundation and storm drain backflow are often ignored (in the permitting process?) but are crucial to consider, as many of our coastal areas are going to become wetlands as the water table rises in parallel to sea level rise. In certain urban areas, as already pointed out in much of the research conducted by UH scientists (and also listed on our CMISLR website), storm drain systems designed to carry away runoff using gravity instead act as sources of salt water flooding/infiltration during high tides.

As to the question of reducing carbon emissions in the hope of warding off serious coastal damage, Dr. Fletcher clearly states that this is too late. For this to happen, greenhouse gas emissions would need to peak by 2025, decline by 40-50% by the end of the decade, and reach net zero by 2050. However, instead of declining and in step with global energy policies, greenhouse gas emissions are projected to increase by 7-15% by the end of the decade.

As to hope for solutions, Dr. Fletcher points out that hope is (and has been) our biggest enemy, but that one must be optimistic and optimism must be imbedded in action. While the five immediate action items

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he recommends to ward off global climate disaster is beyond the control of your Department and even the City, immediate action can and must be taken in this direction while also stopping the permitting process in the 4-foot NOAA sea level rise zone.

As you already pointed out, your Department also reviews the NOAA SLR Viewer which shows projected SLR up to 6.0 feet by the year 2100. Could this really happen? Yes, it could! Specifically, NOAA's 2022 Sea Level Rise Technical Report, representing the first update since 2017, clearly states: *"Failing to curb future emissions could cause an additional 1.5 – 6 feet (0.5 – 1.8 meters) of rise for a total of 3.5 – 7 feet (1.1 – 2.1 meters) by the end of the century. If so, Honolulu, Hawaii, the US, and much of the world as we know it, would cease to function."*

In light of these uncertainties—and setting hope aside—we must not only rethink local, state, and national coastal zone policies as stated by Dr. Fletcher, but must almost immediately implement “boots-on-the-ground” changes that reflect these realities. This must also include truly affordable housing and food self-sufficiency in these planning processes or there will be little left for future generations.

In working together to achieve this now, as you suggested, we will continue to engage the City Council, the Office of the Mayor, and your office, while at the same time continuing to raise public awareness about construction in the NOAA 4-foot sea level rise zone. The latter, if not contained, will only increase the government's liability in the not-too-distant future, as the demand by largely “well-heeled” owners for reimbursement of affected properties will just grow louder while greatly limiting meaningful implementation of managed retreat in response to now unstoppable Climate Change.

Sincerely yours,

  
Klaus Radtke, Ph.D.  
Environmental Scientist  
Coalition Member

Cc: Mayor Rick Blangiardi

City Council Members Andria Tupola, Heidi Tsuneyoshi, Esther Kiaaina, Tommy Waters, Calvin K.Y. Say, Carol Fukunaga, Radiant Cordero, Brandon Elefante, Augusto E. Tulba