COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
COMMITTEE ON THE BUDGET
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

MARK BEGICH
ALASKA

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON OCEANS, ATMOSPHERE, FISHERIES AND COAST GUARD
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

December 6, 2012

The Honorable Daniel K. Inouye
Chairman
Senate Committee on Appropriations
S-128, United States Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Thad Cochran
Vice Chairman
Senate Committee on Appropriations
S-146A, United States of Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Inouye and Vice Chairman Cochran,

Superstorm Sandy was a devastating blow to the Northeast and it was also a wake-up call for much of the country regarding the vulnerability of our coastal communities to severe weather and rising sea-levels. As we rightly consider supplemental appropriations related to Sandy, I also want to bring to your attention to two disasters that have had a similarly devastating impact on communities in Alaska. I request that the Committee consider supplemental appropriations for these Alaska disasters at the same time plans are being made to help the communities impacted by Sandy.

As I am sure you are aware, the states of Alaska, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington and California are in the midst of a slow-motion environmental disaster—an inundating wave of marine debris from the Japanese tsunami last year. Scientists estimate up to 1.5 million tons of debris was swept into the ocean and is being carried towards the U.S.

We are already seeing the impacts in Alaska, as in certain areas nearly every beach is littered with Styrofoam blocks or plastic floats from Japan. This is just the first wave, but it has already overwhelmed the ability of communities to collect and dispose of the trash. As more debris comes, I am concerned for the marine food webs that support our commercial fisheries as well as the tourism industry that relies on clean beaches and an unblemished coastlines. I am very grateful for the Japanese peoples' gift of $5 million to address the tsunami debris and think that the very least the U.S. can do is provide a 3-to-1 match of $15 million. I hope we can find a way to use these funds to leverage private-sector dollars as well, as the scope of the tsunami debris problem is truly overwhelming.

On top of the tsunami debris, several Alaskan coastal communities have been impacted for the past three years when Chinook salmon runs failed, devastating both commercial and subsistence fisheries. Acting Commerce Secretary Rebecca Blank determined a commercial fishery failure occurred in 2010, 2011, and 2012 for various fisheries. These are communities that rely on salmon runs to feed their families, and a multi-year failure

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has resulted in economic impacts no less real than those impacting the East Coast after Sandy. In a separate letter to you, the Alaska delegation has detailed the need for $45 million to respond to this fisheries disaster. I request that this is funded as part of the Sandy package.

In addition to these two disasters, we also need to improve our understanding of how coastal communities can prepare for severe weather events. As we saw during Sandy, our Northeastern urban infrastructure is extremely vulnerable to flooding. Unfortunately, the realities of rising sea levels and the increased frequency of severe weather events we have seen over the past decades mean these threats will only increase. Today's rare flood will be tomorrow's daily high tide. We are all too familiar with these vulnerabilities in Alaska, where several villages are in desperate need of relocation due to increases in coastal erosion brought about by diminishing Arctic sea ice. In some cases homes are literally falling into the sea.

I'm asking that as we focus on Sandy recovery efforts totaling billions of dollars, we dedicate at least $5 million for research into how coastal communities nation-wide can adapt to the coming realities of rising sea levels and frequent severe storms. The National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration's Coastal Services Center, the line item for climate competitive research programs, and Sea Grant programs are well suited to ensure that these funds are spent on developing regional networks that produce actionable science to support practical decision making.

Finally, I'd like to thank you for your long-term, ongoing support of NOAA's weather and climate programs. I share your concerns over keeping the agency's satellite program on track and stabilizing costs, and we hope that the accurate Sandy forecasts helped validate the value and importance of these systems. I look forward to continuing to work with you and your committee on these critical issues.

Sincerely,

Mark Begich
United States Senator