

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0609

January 26, 2021

The Honorable Susan Rice  
Director  
U.S. Domestic Policy Council  
1650 Pennsylvania Ave. NW  
Washington, D.C. 20502

The Honorable Brian Deese  
Director  
U.S. National Economic Council  
1650 Pennsylvania Ave. NW  
Washington, D.C. 20502

Dear Director Rice and Director Deese:

Congratulations on your recent appointments. I look forward to working closely with you to help pull our country and our economy out of the many crises we are facing.

We understand that in addition to immediate COVID-19 relief legislation, the Biden-Harris Administration is developing a long-term recovery package to spur growth and create jobs for the American people. As you develop this package, we urge you to include efforts that will enable rural communities that are going through energy transitions to adapt in the short term and thrive in the long term.

Rural communities enduring disruptions to fossil fuel-based regional economies often face capacity constraints at the same time as they urgently need to spur new economic opportunities. For example, a number of Colorado communities are now preparing for coal plant and coal mine closures, which, for some, represent nearly 50% of their total assessed economic value. We must work with them as they think ahead and push the federal government to be a better partner to locally driven efforts to build resilient, diverse local economies.

The following ideas and proposals stem from work and discussions with rural communities in Colorado. We believe they should be included in longer-term economic recovery and stimulus legislation:

- **Invest in 21<sup>st</sup> century rural broadband** with future-proof speeds and affordable prices so that rural communities can compete on a level playing field. I have introduced the BRIDGE Act that would accomplish this goal by providing \$30 billion in flexible funding to state and tribal governments to deploy affordable, high-speed broadband in unserved and underserved communities nationwide.
- **Invest in natural infrastructure and restoration jobs** by supporting locally-led, collaborative restoration projects including wildfire mitigation, forest restoration, abandoned mine clean-up, and invasive species removal. My proposal, the Outdoor Restoration Partnership Act, is one model to invest \$60 billion in our forests and watersheds to reduce wildfire risk, protect our water supply, and sustain our economy in

the West. This level of natural infrastructure investment would save landowners and local governments money while creating millions of good-paying jobs in rural parts of our country.

- **Expand eligibility and increase flexibility for federal funding** to ensure that transitioning communities have access to federal funding and financing before they lose revenue or otherwise suffer the economic effects of a fossil-fuel transition. This could include expanding flexibility for Economic Development Administration (EDA) assistance and Department of Agriculture Rural Development grants to allow communities that face an upcoming loss of revenue or jobs to qualify, so they can proactively plan for a vibrant economic future. The current approach generally requires communities to wait to qualify until they have already lost jobs and revenue.
- **Target funding to communities in transition** to get ahead of and plan for upcoming energy transitions—an approach that will save money over the long-term and avoid an economic roller coaster in rural communities. Building from existing programs—including EDA’s Assistance to Coal Communities program and EDA’s COVID-19 Recovery and Resiliency Projects—and creating new, targeted programs would help foster economic development opportunities and provide resources for residents to access and retain these good-paying jobs.
- **Simplify and standardize programs across the federal government** by establishing a “one stop shop” for rural workforce and economy development funding, and liaisons within each agency to directly assist rural communities. One model for this is included in our RESILIENT Act, which simplifies and standardizes the federal water infrastructure application process, and provides comprehensive technical assistance to make it easier for rural communities to plan infrastructure projects and access federal infrastructure funds. The RESILIENT Act also tailors federal loan and grant requirements to better meet the needs of rural areas.
- **Ensure that Tribes can access federal funding and programs**, including full access to all of the initiatives mentioned in this letter, by supporting technical assistance and outreach tailored for tribal communities. Targeted, proactive efforts can help assure that Tribes are able to access their fair share of EDA funds and other federal programs.
- **Increase flexibility for opportunity zones** to allow governors to reallocate opportunity zones to new areas, including those with communities facing an energy transition, and sunset zones in higher-income or lower-poverty areas for future investments.
- **Establish a permanent endowment for resource independence** to help offset lost tax base and declining mineral revenues for communities historically dependent on fossil fuel extraction. This endowment could exist in perpetuity and provide a suite of financial tools such as direct funding to offset declining revenue sharing payments, economic transition grants for communities who face an upcoming fiscal cliff, and public investment capital to attract private dollars and increase economic opportunity.

- **Fund clean energy, transportation, water, and other infrastructure** and put in place reforms that help ensure that rural communities and communities facing an energy transition receive their fair share of infrastructure funding. Transitioning communities can in many cases provide excellent sites with pre-existing infrastructure to support clean energy research and demonstration projects.

We encourage you to support and invest in transitioning communities in upcoming economic recovery and jobs legislation. We are eager to partner with you on this effort and would be happy to follow up with more information or to discuss specific proposals in each of these areas. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michael F. Bennet". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michael F. Bennet  
United States Senator