U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Climate Action Plan

Progress Report

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Denis McDonough
Secretary of Veterans Affairs

Climate Action Plan
2022 Progress Report

Agency	Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
Climate Adaptation Official	Denis McDonough, Secretary
Agency Climate Adaptation Webpage	https://www.energy.va.gov/climate.asp

SECTION 1: UPDATES ON PRIORITY ACTIONS

1. Priority action progress summary

Priority Action	Current Status	Estimated date of completion	Brief Description of progress
Priority Action #1 New and Updated Design Standards and Guidance	In progress	09/2023	VA's Office of Construction and Facilities Management (OCFM) has added climate resilience language to several criteria documents. The Climate-Ready Sites & Facilities Working Group is identifying gaps and opportunities for enhanced facility resilience.
Priority Action #2 Critical Supply Stockpiles	In progress	09/2022	The All-Hazards Emergency Cache (AHEC) executive team has been meeting to determine whether current inventory aligns with diseases and conditions associated with climate change.
Priority Action #3 Biosurveillance and Epidemiologic Investigations	In progress	09/2022	Veterans Health Administration (VHA) leadership, clinical health practitioners and VHA Public Health National Program Office are actively monitoring diseases and conditions likely to be exacerbated by climate change.

Priority Action #4 Incorporating Climate Priorities into VA's Strategic Capital Investment Planning (SCIP) Process	In progress	12/2022	VA's Office of Asset Enterprise Management (OAEM) is working with multiple offices to improve the way climate priorities are supported through the SCIP process. Specifically, OAEM is drafting new policy and updated SCIP guidance to allow for a clearer understanding of the kinds of projects that are needed and how they should be evaluated.
Priority Action #5 Updating Climate Change Considerations within Emergency Response Planning	In progress	09/2022	VA's Office of Emergency Management and Resilience (OEMR) is developing a draft Climate Adaptation and Resilience Framework; coordination with VA Administrations and Staff Offices is ongoing.

2. Priority Action Progress Examples:

Priority Action #1: VA published climate resilience requirements in April 2021 as a revision of VA's Site Design Manual. The requirements include evaluating climate risks during site selection and designing to minimize site-related impacts from climate change. This action includes standards for all VA-owned facilities, including standards for information and communications technology, information security, building automation systems and other buildings and operations systems. In addition, VA's OCFM issued a new policy in August 2021 requiring third-party sustainability certification of new construction and major renovation projects using the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification program. LEED includes numerous credit categories that aid VA in the global effort to slow or reverse the effects of climate change.

Priority Action #2: VA continues to prepare and respond to the impact of surges in the demand for supplies and to mitigate novel high consequence infections. The VA AHEC program complements the contents of the U.S. Strategic National Stockpile (SNS) managed by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Public Health Emergency Medical Countermeasures Enterprise. VA's AHEC executive team has been meeting to determine whether current inventory aligns with diseases and conditions associated with climate change. This process will likely proceed over the next fiscal year. VA will assess additional resources that may be required to increase or modify current supplies to address additional countermeasures aligned with SNS inventory.

Priority Action #3: VA's Office of Biosurveillance and Office of Clinical Systems Development and Evaluation Program have expanded biosurveillance and coordinated activities using existing surveillance systems and tools, while the Public Health National Program office continues to track diseases and conditions that may be impacted by climate change. Existing surveillance infrastructure and methodologies will expand during the next fiscal year and may include additional diseases and conditions of interest. These data are shared internally and externally, such as with the Department of Homeland Security and HHS, via ad-hoc surveillance reports and presentations at national conferences and via peer-reviewed publications. Additionally, VA's Office of Information Technology and National Data Systems Program transmits routine surveillance data via the Veterans Data Integration and Federation Enterprise Platform to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National Syndromic Surveillance Program (NSSP) BioSense platform. VA subject matter experts can access VA data in the BioSense system for surveillance purposes, data sharing and collaborative projects. VHA Public Health has also engaged with CDC National Center for Environmental Health (NCEH) to determine how VA and CDC data on climate change and health issues can be exchanged.

Priority Action #4: VA's OAEM conducted a review of the sustainability elements of the SCIP process to increase their relative weights, thus improving their likelihood of project funding in the fiscal year 2023 budget cycle. (SCIP is VA's formal decision-making process that ranks capital projects based on their impact towards meeting specific VA needs and priorities). For the next SCIP cycle, OAEM will continue collaboration with multiple offices to further improve the integration of climate and sustainability elements within the SCIP process. This includes exploring additional opportunities to increase the impact of sustainability and climate-related elements within capital projects by having those projects meet multiple VA needs, incorporating recent sustainability requirements into SCIP policy, providing clearer guidance on SCIP climate and sustainability goals, incorporating design standards into SCIP submissions as they relate to climate and sustainability and improving the coordination of both capital and alternative financing projects within the SCIP submission process.

Priority Action #5: VA's OEMR is operationalizing its prototype Veterans Vulnerability Exposure Index and enhanced risk assessment methods to establish a shared understanding of climate-amplified risk to mission, workforce and the Veteran community and drive a risk-centric capabilities-based approach to strengthening resilience. OEMR is also integrating planning factors and situational/incident-specific risk assessment processes into the annual Eagle Horizon exercise, required by the Presidential Policy Directive 40, to test and validate VA's capabilities for managing potential consequences from all-hazard/climate-amplified disasters. Lessons observed and strengths identified through this exercise will inform the development of enterprise-wide strategies to address risk.

SECTION 2: UPDATES ON OTHER INITIAL PLAN TOPICS

1. Climate-Risk Reduction

VA's OCFM will be establishing a program for evaluating existing facility climate risks and

identifying potential climate-related projects to mitigate risks at those facilities. The program is currently considering resources, including staffing and funding that will be needed to make this program successful.

VA's Home Loan Program within the Loan Guaranty Service (LGY) involves loans made, insured or guaranteed by VA to assist Veterans in obtaining, retaining and adapting homes. LGY recently awarded a contract to gather and analyze climate impact data to assess programmatic fiscal risk exposure due to climate change. Presently, LGY is working with the contractor on gathering and analyzing data to comprehensively assess climate risk exposures to the program. The contractor will provide LGY with data to identify climate risks and make program recommendations to reduce climate financial risks. LGY will also use the assessment to inform programmatic changes to policies or procedures, such as underwriting standards, loan terms and conditions and asset management and servicing procedures. The initial dashboard was provided in June 2022, and LGY is reviewing the information to determine recommended changes, as needed.

2. Climate Vulnerability Assessments

VA is preparing for a nationwide climate vulnerability assessment of its mission critical facilities, including its network of medical centers. VA aims to complete the assessment by the end of calendar year 2022 using the latest available climate data, including the U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit and National Climate Assessment, as well as facility-specific information, to identify and quantify the severity of climate risks to each facility. As part of this effort, VA will also assess the social vulnerability of each facility by evaluating demographics of the surrounding community as well as Veterans' demographics and reliance on the VA facility.

Additionally, each VA Medical Center conducts a hazard vulnerability analysis (HVA) that is reviewed and updated, as appropriate, on an annual basis. The HVA is used to inform and update the Emergency Operations Plan and any mitigation or preparedness activities. HVAs are typically based on historical data, such as using climate patterns and weather events captured and recorded from the last 10 years, for planning purposes. HVAs are completed at both the medical center and clinic levels. Depending on the threat identified, data may be shared with the local community and hospital coalition within that area.

3. Climate Literacy

VA has several initiatives in progress to increase climate literacy across its workforce, including the development of a new webinar discussing climate science, the impact of climate change to VA facilities and operations and VA planning in response to those risks. The webinar is expected to be rolled out and broadly promoted early next fiscal year and will be available on VA's internal Talent Management System, which is an enterprise-wide education and development application. Additionally, VA is pursuing outreach opportunities on climate literacy through its senior executive network such as newsletters and trainings. Enhancing the climate awareness of VA's senior executives will help to foster a culture of knowledge and practice for climate adaptation.

In January, VA Deputy Secretary Donald Remy emailed all VA employees introducing Executive Order (EO) 14057, *Catalyzing Clean Energy Industries and Jobs Through Federal Sustainability,* and the Federal Sustainability Plan while highlighting the transformational changes they will require. VA has also been widely promoting the White House Council on Environmental Quality's Sustainability Speaker Series through internal channels. Additionally, VA created an internal Climate Adaptation SharePoint site to share relevant resource materials with VA employees.

4. Tribal Engagement

VA has taken steps to enhance engagement between climate adaptation and resilience planning and its Tribal government relations activities. Initially, VA will focus efforts on training for relevant staff with the goal of informing VA climate leaders about (a) tribal treaty rights and reserved rights and the related Memorandum of Understanding VA signed in November 2021, (b) tribal consultation requirements from section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and (c) Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (ITEK). VA also plans to brief VA's Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs about VA's 2021 Climate Action Plan (CAP) and related adaptation and resilience activities.

To enhance collaboration and expand opportunities for engagement, VA's Office of Tribal Government Relations will have representation on VA's Climate Adaptation Working Group within the Department's Sustainability Task Force.

5. Environmental Justice

In May 2022, VA published an updated VA Directive 0065 on Climate Change Adaptation and Resilience Planning to reflect policies that align with recent EOs and include the promotion of climate mitigation efforts that also advance environmental justice. The directive includes requirements for VA senior management to identify mitigation strategies that address the impacts of highest concern to VA operations and facilities, while aiming to support environmental justice wherever possible.

In alignment with this policy, and as mentioned in Section 2.2 of this report, VA will prioritize consideration of environmental justice within its upcoming climate vulnerability assessment by including an analysis of the social vulnerability for each facility. Including this information will allow VA decision-makers to factor the impact of climate vulnerabilities on environmental justice communities into the prioritization of facility-level mitigation and resilience solutions.

6. Partnerships

VA is participating in a new learning network, including HHS' Office of Climate Change and Health Equity, HHS' Indian Health Service and the Department of Defense's (DoD) Defense Health Agency, to facilitate cooperation among Federal agencies with health care-related missions. Topics of discussion have included how agencies will meet the needs of populations most vulnerable to climate change, using climate actions to reduce health disparities and resilience and decarbonization efforts within the health care sector. VA's participation in this HHS led learning network will enable closer partnership with

other health care agencies along with the sharing of information on best practices, tools and programs for climate action.

VA is also an active participant in the National Academy of Medicine Action Collaborative on Decarbonizing the U.S. Health Sector. This public-private partnership of leaders from across the U.S. health system is committed to addressing the sector's environmental impact while strengthening its sustainability and climate resilience. The Collaborative is a platform for collective goals and actions for decarbonization based on evidence, shared solutions and a commitment to improve health equity. VA aims for shared learning and shared solutions, such as more standardized health sector metrics to enable benchmarking and enhance transparency of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

VA has established a data sharing agreement via the NSSP with DoD and has proposed a BioSense collaboration project to evaluate chronic respiratory conditions (e.g., asthma, chronic bronchitis and emphysema/chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) that may be exacerbated by climate change and poor air quality. VA expects to complete planning details and begin collecting data for analysis in the coming months. VHA Public Health has also engaged with CDC's NCEH to determine how VA and CDC data on climate and health can be exchanged.

VA's OCFM is establishing an Interagency Agreement with the U.S. Military Academy (West Point) Department of Systems Engineering with the intent of analyzing and designing an asset risk model that improves decision-making quality, in line with priorities identified in VA's 2021 CAP, for potential divestment and investment in infrastructure and technologies.

VA's LGY is engaged with a task force led by the Office of Management and Budget with broad representation across the Federal housing agencies to identify, assess and respond to climate-related financial risks. VA is using the information shared via the task force to assist with its own efforts to assess these risks within the VA Home Loan program.

SECTION 3: NEW TOPICS FROM EO 14057

1. Policy Review

VA is developing policies to incorporate the social cost of GHG emissions for Life Cycle Cost Analysis (LCCA) of non-recurring maintenance, major and minor construction projects. VA's Sustainable Design Manual and Master Specifications related to equipment selections are being modified to incorporate the updated LCCA criteria. These efforts will ensure VA is more completely and accurately accounting for the impact of GHG emissions within its project planning and enable more climate resilient investments in future projects.

As stated in the progress example from Section 1.2 of this report, VA is exploring opportunities for next year's SCIP cycle to enhance the consideration of sustainability and climate elements within proposed capital projects. New elements such as carbon-pollution free electricity will be added while updated policy and guidance will further support VA's

efforts meet the goals of EO 14057 and EO 14008, *Tackling the Climate Crisis at the Home and Abroad*. In combination with efforts to integrate the social cost of GHG emissions into decision-making, VA's SCIP process is another opportunity for VA to reflect climate resilient investment priorities within capital asset planning decisions.

In accordance with EOs 14057 and 14008, VA has updated its Climate Change Adaptation and Resilience Planning directive to refresh agency-level policy and responsibilities across the Department on the integration of climate adaptation and resilience planning into existing decision-making processes and activities. The updated directive includes requirements for identification and prioritization of climate threats, development and implementation of mitigation strategies that advance environmental justice and workforce planning to support these efforts.

VA has integrated climate change considerations within both its Strategic Plan and Agency Financial Report. VA's fiscal years 2022-2028 Strategic Plan highlights responding to the climate crisis as a key component of improving governance and management practices while making evidence-based decisions to ensure quality outcomes and experiences and efficient use of resources. VA's fiscal year 2021 Agency Financial Report includes a spotlight on climate change and its lasting impact on our mission, our management decision-making and our capabilities to provide timely, high-quality care and benefits to Veterans. The inclusion of climate change within these documents demonstrates to VA stakeholders that VA's leadership is committed to an agency-wide effort to tackle the ongoing crisis.

2. Climate Scenario Analysis

VA's OCFM added a requirement within its Site Design Manual for facility designers to evaluate vulnerability during site selection by using the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Sea-Level Change Curve Calculator to predict sea-level changes. In addition, OCFM has launched a Climate-Ready Sites and Facilities Working Group to comprehensively assess VA's facility decision processes and identify opportunities to add or enhance climate resilience into decision points.

VA's LGY intends to develop a dashboard and model using data collected through the climate financial risk assessment effort that is underway. The dashboard will allow VA to better analyze climate impact data and assess the fiscal risk exposure from climate change, such as where climate change has created financial gaps within insurance and where damages could be avoided through improved policy and decision making. LGY will use a recently awarded contract to obtain the necessary climate-related data to help inform decision-making.