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EPA announces over \$1 million in new awards to advance climate resilience in disadvantaged communities across Rhode Island and Southeast Massachusetts

This brings the total investment through EPA's Southeast New England Program (SNEP) Opportunity to Advance Resilience (SOAR) Fund to \$2.3 Million

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. (Oct. 25, 2024) – Today, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced over \$1 million in new awards through the Southeast New England Program (SNEP) Opportunity to Advance Resilience (SOAR) Fund. Joined by U.S. Senators Jack Reed and Sheldon Whitehouse, U.S. Representatives Seth Magaziner and Gabe Amo, and state and local partners, the EPA celebrated the new awards, as well as awards from the first round of funding. With today's announcement, that brings the total awarded through the EPA's SOAR Fund to \$2.3 million.

The SOAR Fund streamlines the federal grant process and encourages new applicants and community-based organizations to apply. Made possible by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, EPA has committed to investing a minimum of \$5 million through the SOAR Fund to disadvantaged communities by 2027. This funding reaffirms EPA's commitment to advancing environmental justice under the Biden-Harris Administration's Justice40 initiative.

To date, EPA's SOAR Fund has awarded \$2.3 million for nine projects across eight disadvantaged communities in Rhode Island and Southeast Massachusetts, including to three first-time applicants.

"Everyone deserves the opportunity to live in a community that is safe, healthy, and resilient, no matter their zip code or how much they earn," **said EPA New England Regional Administrator David W. Cash.**

"Thanks to the Biden-Harris Administration, we are breaking down barriers to federal funding and empowering communities across Southeast New England to develop and lead climate solutions tailored to their unique needs. By working directly with communities who need it most, we are addressing inequities, improving environmental conditions in the places we live, work, and play; and together strengthening our region's ability to respond to the challenges of a changing climate."

"I created the Southeast New England Program to foster collaboration and invest in solutions that help restore and preserve Narragansett Bay and other regional watersheds," **said U.S. Senator Jack Reed, a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee.** "This federal funding for four innovative projects will help boost resilience in communities that are impacted by the worsening effects of climate change while also building and strengthening a workforce who can continue this important work for years to come."

"The frontline communities most affected by climate change too often have the fewest resources to deal with the fallout," **said U.S. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (RI).** "This new investment in environmental justice from our Bipartisan Infrastructure Law will support jobs, improve resiliency, and make climate solutions more accessible in communities across the state."

"In Massachusetts and across the country, underserved communities are on the frontlines of the climate crisis," **said U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren (MA).** "This federal investment will lift up those communities and train the next generation of climate leaders in Southeastern Massachusetts to make sure they're strong and resilient in the face of the growing climate crisis."

"I am proud to have fought for the landmark Bipartisan Infrastructure Law that's investing in disadvantaged communities on the frontlines of climate change to realize their own climate resiliency solutions—solutions developed by and for their own communities," **said U.S. Senator Edward J. Markey (MA).** "These federal dollars will help Groundwork Southcoast develop tomorrow's climate workforce, while tackling the problems in Fall River and New Bedford today. Paying young people for their hard work and expertise from their lived experience is critical for building a workforce that reflects the community in which they work."

"Rhode Island is already feeling the effects of climate change with more frequent flooding, sea level rise and coastal erosion, but the good news is that we can address this issue while creating jobs at the same time," **said U.S. Representative Seth Magaziner (RI).** "This federal funding will be used for workforce training programs in stormwater management and climate resilience that will particularly benefit Rhode Islanders who live in communities that are vulnerable to climate change."

"For decades, the Southeast New England Program has made a measurable difference towns and cities all across Rhode Island," **said Congressman Gabe Amo (RI)**. "As we work to increase resiliency in communities like Providence, East Providence, Warren and Newport, this federal funding will support people and places that are most vulnerable and stand to benefit most from this support."

"These awards support Rhode Island's efforts to plan for and mitigate climate change while supporting a broad range of community needs," **said Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management Director Terry Gray**. "By developing these important partnerships and community-based solutions to the climate crisis, we can break down barriers so everyone, regardless of where you live in Rhode Island, can live in a safe and healthy environment for generations to come."

The **2024** round of funding announced today awards a total of **\$1,052,460** to **four** projects, including two first-time applicants:

- **Voces Fuertes (Strong Voices) for the Water Table**

Award: \$300,000 | Grantee: Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council

Location: Providence, RI

- This project will deliver training and workforce programs through Nuevas Voces and Campeones de Combate Climático, engaging Spanish-speaking residents in climate leadership and preparedness while creating pipelines to high-wage jobs.

- **Climate Resiliency Training and Employment to Address Community Needs**

Award: \$300,000 | Grantee: Groundwork Rhode Island

Location: Providence, RI

- In partnership with city agencies, this project will implement two workforce programs: Storm Crew (stormwater management) and Canopy Crew (urban forestry), providing hands-on training and employment opportunities, particularly for formerly incarcerated individuals.

- **Protecting the Watershed with Trees**

Award: \$152,460 | Grantee: Newport Tree Conservancy (First-time applicant)

Location: Newport, RI

- This initiative will expand tree canopies in Newport's North End and engage residents in stewardship and advocacy to address environmental injustices, improving community well-being and resilience.

- **Workforce Development for Sustainable Southcoast Communities**

Award: \$300,000 | Grantee: Groundwork Southcoast (First-time applicant)

Location: New Bedford and Fall River, MA

- The Green Corps program will train youth aged 18-26 in green infrastructure and climate solutions, building community resilience through hands-on projects and developing local leadership.

The **2023** previous round of funding awarded a total of **\$1,274,926** to **five** projects, including one first-time applicant:

- **Westerly's Resilient Riverfront Renewal**

Award: \$300,000 | Grantee: Southern Rhode Island Conservation District

Location: Westerly, RI

- This project aims to improve the health of the Pawcatuck River watershed with nature-based stormwater solutions and engage residents in long-term workforce training and environmental stewardship.
- **Crescent Park Beach Reopening**
Award: \$300,000 | Grantee: Rhode Island Department of Health
Location: East Providence, RI
 - This award supports reopening Crescent Park Beach as a public swimming area for the first time in over 100 years, offering safe outdoor recreation during increasingly hot summers.
- **Understanding Urban Flooding and Finding Solutions**
Award: \$300,000 | Grantee: City of Providence
Location: Providence, RI
 - This project will model flood risks in vulnerable neighborhoods and develop mitigation strategies in collaboration with community organizations to build long-term resilience.
- **Engaging Environmental Justice Communities to Promote Urban Watershed Health**
Award: \$299,926 (Federal), \$72,349 (Match) | Grantee: Massachusetts Audubon Society
Location: Worcester, MA
 - This project will focus on green infrastructure to reduce flooding, urban heat, and pollution while improving access to green spaces for underserved communities.
- **Where Climate & Change Meet the Water**
Award: \$75,000 | Grantee: East Bay Community Action Program (First-time applicant)
Location: Warren, RI
 - This initiative supports resident participation in the *Market to Metacom* relocation plan to address sea-level rise, offering workshops, mental health support, and leadership development for those impacted by climate change.

What they are saying

"The Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council (WRWC) is thrilled to be a grant recipient in the 2024 SNEP SOAR program. For two years, this grant will support our deep community engagement and leadership pathway programs, Nuevas Voces (New Voices) and Campeones de Combate Climático (Climate Combat Champions). Program participants are Woonasquatucket residents on the frontlines of climate change issues such as flooding and urban heat island. The program names are in Spanish because our participants are more comfortable with Spanish. SNEP SOAR's investment in these leaders will ensure that informed solutions to these challenges are resident led," **said Alicia J. Lehrer, Executive Director of the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council.**

"This funding from the EPA is critical to creating spaces where people in Rhode Island can be healthy and safe outdoors, and it is critical to building community resiliency in the face of climate change," **said Director of Health Dr. Jerry Larkin, Rhode Island Department of Health.** "We thank our federal partners for their continued support, and look forward to all the good that will come of these awards."

"Our administration is always looking at opportunities to bring more amenities to our residents and community. Having a licensed, swimmable beach here at the historic Crescent Park will be wonderful for

our residents both young and old to visit and enjoy for generations come," **said East Providence Mayor DaSilva.**

"Groundwork Rhode Island, along with our partners, Garden Time and the Providence Neighborhood Planting Program, is thrilled to be able to strengthen our workforce development programming focused on climate resilience in Providence, support the City's tree canopy and green infrastructure goals, reduce heat and flooding impacts, and employ local residents for greater environmental and economic justice," **said Amelia Rose, Groundwork Rhode Island Executive Director.**

"The Southern RI Conservation District and Town of Westerly are grateful for the continued support of the SNEP Network. The SOAR Award allows us to complete the streetscape design, build our maintenance team, and move towards the final construction of a project that started with a SNEP's training series. SNEP has helped our team take aspirational goals from the Town's Comprehensive Plan and turn them into a project that will transform Main St. into a pedestrian friendly, green corridor by using nature-based solutions for managing storm water. Westerly's Resilient Riverfront Renewal project is testament to the power of shared knowledge among partnerships, planning, and the regional approach to achieving environmental goals," **said Gina Fuller, District Manager for Southern Rhode Island Conservation District.**

"We, at Groundwork Southcoast, are excited about our partnership with SOAR, supporting our Workforce Development for Sustainable Southcoast Communities initiative," **said Maura Valdez, Executive Director of Groundwork Southcoast.**

"Support from SOAR is an investment in the environmental leadership of local youth and communities, building equity in the south coast of Massachusetts, and will be pivotal to launching our Green Corps program," **said Fernando Rodriguez, Programs Director of Groundwork Southcoast.**

"The Broad Meadow Brook Wildlife Sanctuary Stream Restoration Project will meet two of our main organizational goals: making our wildlife sanctuaries more climate resilient and increasing access to green space for environmental justice communities. This initial assessment and modeling of ecological restoration practices is critical as it will result in reduced flooding in the Upper Brook watershed and will demonstrate practices relevant for flooding interventions across Worcester. We're grateful to residents, City officials, and our partners for their input and support," **said Jenn Madson, Mass Audubon's Central Regional Director.**

About SNEP and the SOAR Fund

The SOAR Fund is part of the Southeast New England Program (SNEP), focusing on improving water quality, ecological health, and community resilience. Since 2012, SNEP has provided \$67 million in funding and technical assistance to help municipalities, non-profit organizations, state and tribal governments, and other organizations accomplish these goals.

The SOAR Fund was developed to align with the Justice40 initiative by ensuring that 40% of federal investments benefit historically underserved communities. With over \$2.3 million awarded so far, SOAR is making climate solutions more accessible by streamlining the grant process.

Applications for the next round of SOAR funding will open in Spring 2025.

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