Opening Statement of Ranking Member Whitehouse Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Hearing: "Oversight of the US Army Corps of Engineers." September 17, 2025

Thank you, Chairman, for the hearing today to discuss implementation of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers civil works program. Thank you, Assistant Secretary Telle, and Lieutenant General Graham, for appearing before the Committee.

One of my most vexing problems, one the Corps refuses to acknowledge, is the chronic underfunding of coastal storm risk management projects. For the Ocean State, that's a bad situation.

While flood risk is on the rise nationwide, coastal areas face the most severe increases due to rising sea levels and more frequent extreme rainfall events. In First Street's National Flood Risk Assessment, coastal cities outrank inland cities by *all* measures of substantial flood risk.

The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office has determined that the share of properties exposed to flood risk in coastal communities is more than twice that of inland communities, and coastal communities are projected to see even sharper increases in flood risk over the next two decades.

Greater flood and storm risks are, in turn, contributing to a property insurance crisis that threatens to trash our entire economy.

When risk makes property uninsurable, the property also becomes unmortgageable. Without mortgages, property markets crash. And as we all saw in 2008, when property markets crash, so does the economy.

Despite this dire situation, coastal storm risk management projects receive between 20 and 100 times less funding than inland flood risk management projects *every year*.

And the Corps' response when presented with this evidence? It dismisses it.

That simply isn't good enough.

The Corps requires strong leaders who will tackle problems like this one head-on and embrace reform.

Assistant Secretary Telle, I supported your nomination and confirmation because I know you understand and appreciate the critical role that congressional oversight plays in ensuring that federal agencies deliver for the people.

I value your commitment to maintaining an open line of communication with Senator Capito and me, and to engaging with Committee staff on a regular basis to keep the Corps accountable.

In prior testimony before this Committee, you spoke of your formative experience helping to secure funding and resources for the State of Mississippi's recovery from the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina.

And you know from experience managing the FEMA portfolio for the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee that disasters do not differentiate between red and blue states.

Under your leadership, I expect to improve the political bias so blatant in the Corps' fiscal year 2025 Construction work plan, shifting over $250 million in construction funding from blue states to red states, completely eliminating funding for four critical California flood risk management projects to fund navigation projects in Texas *that did not even make the cut in the Corps' fiscal year 2025 budget.*

Assistant Secretary Telle, I expect you to put an end to it. Such egregious partisanship does not serve the Army Corps, and it does not serve the American people.

I hope you agree that funding allocations must be driven by objective criteria.

I also expect to see progress on project delivery. Cost escalations and delays are pervasive and recurring issues in the Corps' civil works construction program.

The Trump Administration's attacks on the federal workforce have only made addressing these problems more difficult.

In just a few months, DOGE's deferred resignation program and voluntary early retirement have hollowed out Corps offices, so that across the agency, workforce reductions undermine mission execution.

Some Corps district offices have lost 5 percent of their total staff, others have lost as much as *20 percent*, and all have likely lost expert personnel.

The prolonged Trump hiring freeze is exacerbating the staffing shortage.

As a result of this DOGE-driven chaos, Corps offices are either deferring work, contracting it out at a higher cost, or paying employees overtime to complete it—all while continuing to pay salaries to employees who, under the DRP, no longer report for duty.

This is not just a matter of workforce morale; the DRP has jeopardized mission-critical operations and increased project costs.

Assistant Secretary Telle, General Graham, you have your work cut out for you. I hope that you will acknowledge the challenges, roll up your sleeves, and work cooperatively with this Committee to address them.