After Hurricane Sandy, New Jersey Residents Support Government Mitigation, But Not Footing the Bill

Washington, D.C. – New Jersey residents who were surveyed four months after Hurricane Sandy battered the East Coast of the United States in October 2012 expressed strong support for government policies to reduce the likelihood of severe damage from future hurricanes, according to a study involving 875 residents. Researchers also found, however, that only a small fraction of those surveyed—about one in five—were willing to contribute to a fund to pay for implementing the government policies.

Professor and Associate Dean of the Faculty Michael R. Greenberg and five colleagues at Rutgers University in New Jersey undertook their study to gauge public support for policies such as prohibiting housing in high risk flood zones, requiring houses to be constructed to resist storms, and taking other steps to reduce the vulnerability of areas prone to hurricane and severe weather damage. They also were interested in identifying the factors most strongly associated with a willingness to politically and financially support these and other policies. The authors say that New Jersey is among the most beleaguered states along the East coast, having been inundated by Hurricane Floyd in 1999 and Hurricane Irene in 2011, both of which wreaked massive damage and cost billions of dollars. The other Rutgers University researchers who conducted the study include Marc D. Weiner, Robert Noland, Jeanne Herb, Marjorie Kaplan and Anthony J. Broccoli.

For their study, Public Support for Policies to Reduce Risk after Hurricane Sandy, the researchers’ survey results found that 53 to 63 percent of respondents favored government policies, such as allowing local government to require disaster-resistant home construction and having federal and state officials designate storm buffer areas as off limits to development. Furthermore, 49 percent favored government financial incentives to rebuild damaged areas in ways that would reduce future risk, and 42 percent supported prohibiting housing in certain areas. Overall, 49 percent of respondents “strongly favored” four or more of seven policy options, while the combined proportion of respondents who either “strongly” or “somewhat favored” one of the options ranged from 61 to 85 percent.

The researchers found almost all respondents unwilling to pay out of their own pockets for mitigation and other programs. Regarding support for an income tax increase of 1 percent for 5 years, the study found that only 19 percent of respondents strongly supported the tax compared with 68.6 percent who strongly opposed it. Likewise, only 24.2 percent strongly supported a
1 percent increase in the state’s sales tax for 5 years, compared with 64.4 percent who strongly opposed that policy option. Only 14.4 percent of respondents supported a 5-cents-per gallon tax on gasoline sales for 5 years, compared with 77.8 percent who strongly opposed the idea. Noting that 52.5 percent of respondents strongly supported a special 1 percent tax on hotels, motels, airports and recreation facilities for 5 years, the authors’ comment that “the consensus was to pass the cost to future generations or to visitors, many of whom will not be from the state.”

Interestingly, residents of the New Jersey Shore area were not more in favor of mitigation programs than other New Jersey residents. Between shore and non-shore respondents, only minimal differences were found in support for government mitigation and resilience actions.

In trying to understand what attributes would make respondents most supportive of government policies in response to hurricanes and other such disasters, the researchers focused on issues relating to concerns about climate change and trust in scientists who study it. They also focused on views towards the federal government playing a major role in land use and building management programs.

The survey found that 64 percent of respondents agreed that climate change is a risk to them and their family and friends. Perceptions and values concerning climate change proved to be the strongest factor predicting support for government mitigation and resilience policies. At the same time, according to the researchers, their findings do not mean that the policies described in their study and other similar studies will be supported or followed. The authors cite three obstacles that emerged from their research. First, half of the respondents felt that state and local government did not understand the implications of global climate change for their region, and two-thirds did not trust the local news media to inform them about events. Moreover, as in other states, many New Jersey residents expressed a generic distrust of the federal government. The most important long-term constraint is the unwillingness of people to support the establishment of a dedicated fund with their own funds. As time passes, without another major event, support for these policies will decrease.

*Risk Analysis: An International Journal* is published by the nonprofit Society for Risk Analysis (SRA). SRA is a multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, scholarly, international society that provides an open forum for all those who are interested in risk analysis. Risk analysis is broadly defined to include risk assessment, risk characterization, risk communication, risk management, and policy relating to risk, in the context of risks of concern to individuals, to public and private sector organizations, and to society at a local, regional, national, or global level. www.sra.org

Contact: Steve Gibb, 202.422.5425 skgibb@aol.com to arrange an interview with the author(s). Note to editors: The complete study is available upon request from Steve Gibb or here: http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/risa.12203/full