

# RAPID RESPONSE MEMO

## Mobilizing Americans After a Climate Disaster

### Introduction

The reality of millions of Americans, suddenly forced to breathe in toxic smoke from wildfires abroad this June, is a stark reminder that we all share this planet and of the unequal consequences of our current climate catastrophe. Shared experiences with a climate disaster are moments in time when public consciousness on climate issues is unusually high. In these flash points, we have a greater opportunity to shine a light on the wealthy corporations responsible and animate public will towards the solutions that we seek.

In recent qualitative research\* conducted by We Make The Future, Lake Research Partners, and ASO Communications just days before the Canadian wildfires, we learned that many Americans across races and places are primed and ready to demand government action on climate and accountability for the fires, floods, and fumes corporations have caused.

With the visceral impacts of the outcomes of destroying our climate on display, we urge campaigners, communicators, and community leaders to use the following guidance to mobilize and move our base and persuadable audiences to call out for action and leadership that will protect our climate, our families and our futures.

### Findings: Effective Calls to Action

- Even in the midst of a palpable disaster, people need a clear sense that we can not merely survive but actually confront our problems in order to live better lives. Combine calls to action, such as holding fossil fuel corporations accountable in the aftermath of these events, with a vision for the better future we will create. In our focus groups, audiences reacted positively when we prompted them to imagine a healthier, cleaner future with community-run energy and better climate policies. We can then connect them to political actions to realize this vision, such as contacting elected officials, voting, and boycotting, petitioning and pressuring corporations to pay for their damage.
- It's critical that we make it clear who is at fault for the disasters that we are facing – the wealthy corporations, Big Oil, fossil fuel CEOs and the politicians they pay for who want

\*During the last week of May, 2023, we conducted six focus groups among adults nationwide who fall into either Base or Persuadable groups as defined by their views towards racism, the role of government, and climate change. We conducted groups among Asian American and Pacific Islander Base and Persuadable, Black Base, Latinx Base and Persuadable, White Base and Persuadable, ages 18-29 Base, and Indigenous Base and Persuadable adults.

to keep hoarding our wealth, blocking the policies we want and need, and refusing to pay for the damage they've done to our lives and the places we call home.

- When asked about reacting to climate disasters, many participants start off thinking about direct surface-level aid actions like donating supplies and volunteering to repair, but when given a list, many, especially from our AAPI, Black, and White focus groups, were drawn to taking political action and seeing that as most impactful.
- From a list of potential actions, these are the top civic ones that participants selected:
  - Sign a petition demanding fossil fuel corporations pay what they owe us for the damage they've caused
  - Participate in a boycott of a (fossil fuel) corporation responsible for damaging our climate
  - Ask a friend or family member to be a voter in the next election
  - Attend a rally or protest outside an elected official's office, government agency, or corporate headquarters
  - Volunteer for a political candidate or cause advocating for climate solutions
  - Contact your elected officials, demanding government action to repair the damage to our climate and communities

### Overall Messaging Best Practices

- **LEAD with values**, naming that they're **shared across races, classes and backgrounds**.

While there is an understandable urge to emphasize the harms and horrors of these events, we know from years of research that focusing on doom and gloom demoralizes and demobilizes most people, causing them to turn away from the problem or seek only individualized solutions (such as purchasing air filters, altering daily routines) rather than take collective action. Instead, we must lead with our values and ground our audiences in what we are for and we must explicitly mention race. Mentioning race in the shared value pushes back at the division our opposition stokes and emphasizes the collective values that we hold.

- **Name the culprits behind this crisis and ascribe motivations** behind their actions to perpetuate harm and block solutions.

We must provide a clear origin story for present conditions so people do not fall back on blaming natural causes or pointing the finger at one another. It's imperative that we name the handful of culprits behind climate change instead of naming climate change

itself as an agent. People can't go to the climate's doorstep or petition the planet for change; but there **are** very clear villains who pollute our environment in this story that we can target. We must demand action and accountability from corporations and political leaders who are violating our shared values and desires.

- **Combat cynicism by highlighting past and recent victories** we've achieved by coming together.

In addition to contending with the false claims and attacks from our opposition, cynicism is one of the greatest barriers to getting more people, including those who already care about the climate crisis, to take sustained action. We must cite ways we've taken collective action and achieved positive change recently or in past generations. This is especially critical for overcoming the understandable skepticism and despair felt by young audiences in order to activate them in the immediate and for the long term.

- **Make clear of our desired destination** by connecting action in the present with our vision for the future.

We must close with the vision of a beautiful, safe, and healthy future we want and a clear and concrete call to action connected to that destination. Who will be or should be in charge of working to repair the damage and protect our families? Rather than just diminishing some harms, we must point to the desirable outcomes (economic well-being, clean air and water, safe and thriving families) we achieve by joining together in order to inspire durable collective action.

### **More information on our continuing research:**

We set out in these focus groups to explore three research questions:

1. How do we mobilize people to demand energy that's not just clean, but in their hands, controlled democratically by a public board, committee, and/or community neighborhood?
2. How do we build support for solutions that benefit people of color among others most impacted by the climate crisis?
3. What forms of advocacy are people most interested in taking after a climate disaster?

We are now going into a round of survey research. If you're interested in staying in touch and receiving the final results and recommendations, [please sign up here](#).

To review the full focus group findings, [click here](#).