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Scientists see no point to easing seawall ban

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More than 40 coastal scientists have signed a letter urging state lawmakers to resist easing a ban on seawalls along the shoreline.

The scientists, at universities in North Carolina and other states, oppose an effort by two coastal communities to build fixed structures at inlets. Figure Eight Island and Ocean Isle Beach have asked the state legislature for an exception to the state's ban on seawalls -- on an experimental basis -- to fight beach erosion.

The communities plan to press the issue again in this year's General Assembly, arguing that a universal ban doesn't take into consideration situations in which seawalls might be scientifically and environmentally sound.

The scientists, however, argue there are no such exceptions. In their letter, they say the negative consequences of hardened structures at inlets and along shorelines are well documented. Structures such as terminal groins, which are made of steel or rock and built perpendicular to the shore to trap sand, may cause erosion farther down shore.

"The idea we'll go out there and put something in the water, use the coast of North Carolina as our test laboratory and then argue about what happened afterward, that is bad coastal management in my opinion," said Rob Young, a coastal geologist and director of the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines at Western Carolina University, which circulated the letter.

The communities are seeking a change in the law because they depend on sandbags to protect houses from erosion near shifting inlets.

The homeowners association of Figure Eight, a private island off New Hanover County that is an enclave of beach homes for the wealthy, wants the option of building a steel wall perpendicular to the shoreline. The structure would trap sand at the eroding northern tip near Rich Inlet. Currently, 18 houses are protected by sandbags near the inlet.

No options

At Ocean Isle Beach in Brunswick County, about a half-dozen houses have sand bags near Shallotte Inlet.

"Sometimes we have to do things to help Mother Nature maintain some of our coastal areas," said Debbie Smith, mayor of Ocean Isle Beach. "We just have no options right now. It's either beach renourishment or sand bags."

A year ago, the town spent about \$600,000 putting sand on the most severely eroded stretch of beach near Shallotte Inlet, but that sand has mostly washed away, Smith said.

Chris McKenzie, a homebuilder and homeowner on Ocean Isle Beach, has watched 200 feet of beach disappear from in front of his house in less than four years. The house is now girded with sandbags.

"I've invested my finances in that house," McKenzie said. "I home school in that house. To live down there in a state of fear all the time doesn't seem fair to me and my family."

Pilot project

In May, the state Senate passed a bill allowing construction of an experimental terminal groin to stabilize an inlet.

The House did not take up the bill. But because it passed one chamber, it remains eligible for consideration again in 2008. The state Coastal Resources Commission would decide whether to allow the groin.

Rep. Lucy Allen, the chairwoman of the House committee that has the bill, declined to handicap its prospects.

Spencer Rogers, a coastal engineering expert with N.C. Sea Grant, a research and education program, said some of the worst examples of man-induced erosion were caused by groins and jetties. But he said that those built on the end of an island were different and that it would be useful for state regulators to have the option of considering them.

Figure Eight Island

If lawmakers grant such an exception, Figure Eight Island could be the first to take advantage of it. The community's homeowners association has commissioned a study overseen by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers of alternatives for managing Rich Inlet. It wants to be able to include a fixed structure as one of the alternatives.

If state regulators find the structure doesn't stabilize the inlet or has adverse impacts that outweigh its benefits, they can direct that it be removed at the island's expense.

"It's something the homeowners association would like the corps and all other regulatory agencies to be able to consider," said David Kellam, administrator of Figure Eight. "I'd envision we'd try it for two to four years and prove it's beneficial to everyone. At that point, we'd need to reinforce it with rock."

Kellam said the 563 property owners would have to decide whether to pay for it, once they knew the costs and whether it was a viable option.

Tom Jarrett, an engineer with Coastal Planning & Engineering, which is doing the study, estimated that a terminal groin at Rich Inlet would cost \$5 million to \$10 million.

"The groin is not a cure-all," Jarrett said. "It will only have a limited impact."