

## **Beaches or Buildings: It's Your Choice**

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At the beach at Neskowin, in Tillamook County, a house built in 1997 is now threatened by erosion and about to fall in. In an act of desperation, an agent for the property owner has requested permission to build a riprap (boulder) seawall with steel sheet pile behind it to help protect his investment. Although Oregon's Statewide Planning Goals & Guidelines clearly state that permits for beachfront protective structures can only be issued where development existed prior to January 1, 1977, and despite efforts by concerned neighbors to prevent its construction, the Tillamook County Planning Commission approved the seawall. The Oregon Department of Parks & Recreation is now considering the request.

We have viewed images of the erosion at Neskowin - including those of the threatened house. We have seen the total loss of beach in front of the "Pacific Sands" seawall. We now see the seawall and associated beach loss spreading north and south from the "Pacific Sands." We have analyzed the geologic report prepared for this project by a consultant hired and paid by the owner. We don't have to be in Oregon to share with you what the problem is here: On an eroding shoreline, hard structures such as riprap seawalls cause beaches to disappear. It doesn't matter whether the structure is wood, steel or rock, any beach retreating against any fixed object will eventually disappear. It is a particularly bad idea to build a rock wall in front of an individual home because it will enhance erosion rates along adjacent properties, thereby increasing the demand for protection and ultimately, more rock walls. There must be thousands of examples worldwide as to the folly of building a sea wall to protect one home.

The underlying problem at Neskowin, however, is much deeper. At a Tillamook County Planning Commission hearing on this issue, local experts said that experiences along the east coast don't apply to the west coast, and stated that riprap neither causes nor amplifies beach erosion. Regarding the first point, the beaches of Maine and New England have many similarities to the Oregon coast. Regarding the experts' belief that riprap doesn't

cause erosion, we haven't heard such a pronouncement at a public meeting in forty years. Coastal managers and decision makers worldwide, with the possible exception of the Tillamook County Planning Commission, accept the principles of beach loss in front of riprap, which were first proven by the Romans.

Before the rock wall controversy at Neskowin came to our attention, we were under the impression that Oregon was a "beach first" state like North Carolina which just passed a law prohibiting beach erosion control structures, such as rip-rap seawalls. Our belief was based on former Governor Kitzhaber's proclamation that homes at "The Capes" at Netarts in Tillamook County must be allowed to fall in because preservation of the public's beach must come before protection of private property. We are not sure what category to put Oregon in now. Inconsistent certainly comes to mind.

A geologist with the Oregon Department of Geology and Mineral Industries recently acknowledged that building on the Oregon coast in general – and along the beach at Neskowin in particular - is extremely risky business. That's progress. But what Oregon has apparently failed to learn from a wealth of worldwide experience is that armoring an eroding beach eventually results in the loss of the beach.

Tillamook County planners and state agencies charged with managing Oregon's coast – a precious resource prized and used by people from all over the state and country - need to be educated about this issue. Perhaps Tillamook County and the State of Oregon are justified, should they allow the wall to be built. But such a decision should only be made with a full public understanding and acceptance of the fact that, as long as erosion continues, the beach is doomed.

The body of literature on the impacts of erosion control structures represents a broad spectrum of professional opinion. As the Parks & Recreation Department deliberates the future of Oregon's sandy beaches, we urge the agency to heed experience and learn from the mistakes of those who chose to put the short-term financial interests of beachfront property owners above the needs of the beach itself.

The state of Oregon must come into the 21st century and make the tough call, like we have in North Carolina, to preserve the beach for future generations. Let the building fall in, demolish it or move it back. But don't protect it.

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