

It is unthinkable. At a time when scientists are predicting more intense and probably more frequent hurricanes in coming decades, and just months after the most destructive storm ever to hit North America, the South Carolina state legislature is considering a bill that would allow development to creep ever closer to the ocean. If enacted, the new law would be a blow to South Carolina's beachfront management program.

In recognition of a rising sea level and the fact that virtually the entire South Carolina shoreline was eroding, the state enacted coastal "setbacks" in 1988 that dictate how close to the beach a building may be constructed. The objective was to create a buffer between the ocean and what's built beside it.

But this forward thinking concept was quickly compromised in 1990 when politics allowed the setback line to move seaward along beaches artificially stabilized through nourishment (even though nourished beaches erode much faster than natural beaches). The new bill doesn't move the setback line. Rather, it will allow swimming polls to be placed seaward of the setback line, within the protective buffer, behind existing erosion control structures along both nourished and unnourished beaches.

Combine historic beach erosion rates, the impacts of hurricanes such as Hugo, Katrina, Rita and Wilma and the possibility of increased storminess, and it is clear that nothing should be placed closer to the beach, even behind existing erosion control structures.

What's more troubling, in terms of the future of the South Carolina coast, than the impact of this bill is an acknowledgement by the bill's sponsor that the proposed law is intended to benefit a single property owner.

South Carolina prohibits "hard" shoreline stabilization such as sea walls, and is one of the states that pioneered the concept of banning hard structures in recognition of the fact that, on eroding shorelines, structures destroy the beach. Unfortunately, almost 25% of the developed South Carolina shoreline was already "hardened" when the law was put in place.

Some will argue that the state will never allow additional hard erosion control structures. But it already has. Just a few years ago groins (shore-perpendicular structures built to trap sand) were declared illegal under the SC Beachfront Management Act. But at the urging of a handful of influential individuals, the legislature simply changed the law and made them legal, even though it is widely known that groins degrade beaches.

Today, at Hunting Island State Park, where an eroding shoreline poses a threat to some trees, a parking lot and a few rental cottages, the state has granted a permit for the construction of at least six groins. Additional groins have been proposed for Folly Beach and Pawleys Island. If the state will make an exception and allow hard structures along an undeveloped state park, imagine what might happen along the rest of the developed coast.

South Carolina shouldn't allow structures to be placed closer to the ocean, where storms are likely to increase in both intensity and frequency in coming decades and where the

shoreline is already retreating. It certainly shouldn't bow to political pressure or cronyism and change sound coastal management rules for the benefit of a select few.

The state should be planning to remove structures already close to the beach. It should be seriously considering a prohibition on high-rise buildings, like those along Myrtle Beach and Hilton Head Island, which make responding to erosion and a rising sea level impossible. It should be considering the long-term environmental, economic and societal consequences of pouring more sand and more dollars into the surf zone via beach nourishment.

South Carolina has quietly become a national leader in coastal management, and its efforts to responsibly manage beaches and shorelines for future generations are commendable. This bill is not only bad public policy; it sets a disturbing precedent and, if approved, takes South Carolina a huge step in the wrong direction.

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