

Flood. Rebuild. Repeat

Hurricanes strike, federal dollars flow and lessons are never learned

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By Rob Young and Orrin H. Pilkey

During moments like these, the country understandably feels sympathy for those who have lost property in the wake of Hurricane Ike. But there is an important question that should be raised while the nation's attention is once again focused on billions of dollars in damage.

Should the federal government pay to rebuild along vulnerable shorelines such as Surfside Beach, Texas? Surfside Beach, which is at the west end of Fallets Island, had houses built out on the beach. Many of those homes were destroyed.

Of course, it might make fiscal sense to repair our Houstons and our downtown Galvestons, but oceanfront communities perched on highly vulnerable, storm-prone shorelines are another matter.

Vulnerable communities

The Texas land commissioner has proposed that development be set back 60 times the erosion rate. So if the shoreline is eroding a foot a year, then building would start 60 feet back. This is a good start, but it wouldn't have saved many of the homes.

Surfside Beach is not the only example of a dangerous place to build. There are many highly vulnerable coastal communities that have suffered repeated, and recent, damage from tropical storms. The list includes Grand Isle, La., Santa Rosa Island, Fla., Waveland, Miss., and Topsail Island, N.C. The continued and repeated destruction of these communities is predictable. Yet, they have all been rebuilt with federal funds multiple times, costing taxpayers billions of dollars.

Several weeks ago, many in the path of Hurricane Gustav talked about dodging a bullet. But Dauphin Island, Ala., was not so lucky. After Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, the federal government paid \$4 million to rebuild the beach and to construct a sand berm on Dauphin Island. Gustav has removed that berm, and waves from Ike overwashed the island. Dauphin Island has been hit by tropical storms seven times since Hurricane Frederic in 1979. This has cost the federal taxpayers about \$80 million (excluding Gustav).

Emergency law at fault

The problem lies in the 1988 Stafford Act. When the president declares an emergency, financial and physical help is immediately forthcoming. Public aid has repeatedly poured into these risky communities to fund the replacement of damaged infrastructure in the

same vulnerable location. No lessons learned. It is time for major reform of the Stafford Act. It is time to cut places such as Surfside Beach and Dauphin Island loose. What are the consequences of no longer applying the act to certain communities? Most likely, the west end of Dauphin Island and Surfside Beach would be abandoned by current property owners. In other oft-damaged beach communities, local taxpayers would decide based on their own economic calculus.

Our policy of providing federal funds for repetitively damaged communities makes no sense in a time of rising sea level. In coming decades, as sea level rises, storm damage will increase.

If you choose to build in an area subject to repeated coastal hazards, you pay for the cleanup, for replacing the roads, for putting the beach back in front of your homes or to move the house back from the shoreline. This is a matter of fiscal responsibility and fairness that all Americans should be able to agree on.

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