

Legislation may allow for terminal groins

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A bill to be introduced in the next few days in the N.C. Senate will revive a longstanding debate along the coast.

Sen. Harry Brown, R-Onslow, said Friday that a draft of a bill that would allow for erosion control structures known as terminal groins is being finalized. He plans to introduce the legislation in the coming week.

State law currently prohibits the use of hardened structures such as groins and jetties along the coast. The bill addresses only terminal groins, low profile rock walls built perpendicular to shore to help prevent erosion near inlets.

Brown said similar legislation to allow terminal groins has been introduced each of the past three long sessions of the General Assembly. In 2009, a bill passed the Senate and was held up in the House of Representatives.

Since then, an election has brought change that has given Republicans control of the Senate and House.

“Hopefully, now is the time to get this issue behind us and to allow some of these (terminal) groins to be installed to help prevent the erosion along the coast,” he said.

However, there is opposition to the change in law.

The North Carolina Coastal Federation said the legislation would be a radical change in coastal policy and weaken a 25-year-old ban on hardened structures that was codified into law in 2003. It’s a policy, they say, that has kept hard structures from sea walls to jetties from popping up all along the pristine beaches North Carolina is known for.

Allowing for a few terminal groins now would open the door for more to follow, said Frank Tursi, an assistant director for the Coastal Federation.

“This could be something that changes the course of our beaches forever,” he said.

Tursi said terminal groins protect the homes and property in their vicinity but tend to increase erosion in areas further down the beach.

The concerns have the Coastal Federation staff at work spreading the word about the legislation and the need to stop it.

State Rep. Pat McElraft, R-Emerald Isle, doesn't see the legislation as a threat to the state's beaches and said she will help when the bill gets to the House.

For one, she said, it would only involve terminal groins at the inlets and there are only a few places along the coast where they would be of benefit. The legislation would give them a tool for dealing with erosion in some of the most dynamic areas of the coast.

McElraft said they have been used successfully in other states and the terminal groins could protect the beach and property that brings tax revenues to the coast.

"We know how precious the sand is. It is tourism; it is our tax base," she said.

The N.C. Coastal Resources Commission took no position for or against terminal groins in a study completed last year but recommended several requirements for anyone should they be allowed to build one.

Brown said he expects some of those protections to be incorporated into the bill.

A fiscal analysis of the use of terminal groins in North Carolina was also completed by the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines at Western Carolina University. That study concluded that terminal groins are not a fiscally sound strategy for dealing with coastal property at risk due to erosion. It also states the limited fiscal benefits produced by terminal groins don't justify the expenditure of state funds.

Terminal groins can cost as much as \$10 million to build and \$1 million or more to maintain each year.

Tursi said it's a big expense and one that could potentially fall on others if coastal communities turn to the state to help pay for them.

Brown said it's the cost of the projects, that would have to go through a permitting process, that could keep some from ever happening.

"Honestly, I think the cost will limit how many can be built," he said.