

Should nation's taxpayers be paying for beach-fill efforts?

By Anthony R. Wood
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The Defense Department is enlisting a familiar weapon in an effort to protect \$13 billion worth of property in Avalon and Stone Harbor from nature's attacks - the sand grain.

Almost certainly, a substantial portion of the 600,000 cubic yards of sand that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers plans to pump on the Seven Mile Island beaches, as early as this week, at a cost of about \$7 million is going to disappear from view with the next storm waves.

It happens all the time, and that's one reason sand-pumping has become a public symbol of the perceived futility of trying to lock in the nation's restless coastlines.

Disappearing sands notwithstanding, beach-fill has proved effective in preventing damage and holding the ocean at bay.

The fundamental question is: Should taxpayers - from urban residents to Iowa farmers and Wyoming ranchers - be paying for it?

"That's the basic issue," says Lim Vallianos, a corps engineer for more than 30 years, now retired. He adds that sand operations are "pork-barrel" projects, in which where sand gets pumped has far more to do with politics than need.

Development advocates such as Harry Simmons, longtime president of the American Shore and Beach Preservation Association, argue that sand-pumping is a heck of a deal for landlubbers.

They like the beach, and preventing damage is a cheaper way of saving it than making costly repairs.

The real beneficiaries are coastal-property owners, counters Andrew Coburn of the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines at Western Carolina University. The benefit to the federal economy is questionable, if not negligible, he said.

Historically, the federal government has picked up 65 percent of the cost of beach projects, with state and local governments making up the balance.

How that federal money wound up in front of fudge shops and boardwalks is a long and complicated saga, says Vallianos, and it has a lot to do with New Jersey, a major

beneficiary. Coburn estimates that \$545 million has been spent on protecting the Garden State's beaches by federal, state, and local governments, the second-highest total in the nation behind Florida.

New Jersey had such an erosion problem in the early 20th century that it commissioned studies by engineers in 1922 and 1924.

That led to the creation of the beach-preservation association, the nation's first beach-lobbying group.

In 1930, the association persuaded Congress to enlist the corps in the effort. Years later, the corps was sweeping for mines on the beaches of Normandy on D-Day.

The war for New Jersey's beaches escalated dramatically with the devastating Ash Wednesday storm of 1962 that damaged up to 50,000 homes and was blamed for 22 deaths in the Mid-Atlantic region. In that storm, the ocean met the bay in five places on Long Beach Island, and beaches from Nags Head to Long Island were ripped to shreds. It also left street-clogging sand in places like Avalon.

The beach-fill program has survived for 40 years despite the bipartisan reluctance of every White House occupant, including President Obama. "They kind of looked at this askance," Vallianos said.

The nation has spent \$80 million to \$100 million annually on shore-protection programs in the last decade, estimates Howard Marlowe, a lobbyist who has been instrumental in keeping the federal sand-dollar pumps operating.

He said that, initially, Obama was resistant to beach projects, but that he had noted a distinct recent softening. "There was a little convincing that was done," Marlowe said.

Simmons said the nation should spend more on beaches, perhaps \$300 million a year, and that it needs to find a permanent funding method. He said the loss of beaches would be a tremendous blow to people who want the option of visiting them.

How would they react, he asked, if they were told: "You can't go to the beach, because there's no beach to put your towel on, there's no hotel for you to rent"?

Coburn holds that most Shore properties are rentals and that the nation needs to make distinctions between protecting people and guarding investments.

"The goal is really to protect someone's investment, and a risky one at that," he said. "If my stock loses, the Corps of Engineers isn't going to protect me."

Ultimately, said Duke University geologist Orrin Pilkey, nature is holding the trump card that will doom beach-fill. Although the rate is disputed, the sea level has been rising for

thousands of years since the last ice age ended. That is forecast to continue - and perhaps escalate.

"The underlying sea level is what's really going to change things," Pilkey said. "We're going to have to say, '*No mas.*' "