

U.S. allocates record amount for beach projects

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For a generation, they have been the targets of budget-cutters, but this year the federal government plans to spend \$148 million on shore-protection projects - believed to be a record amount.

About \$40 million of that would go toward beach projects in South Jersey from Long Beach Island to Cape May, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which released its spending plan last week.

"I was surprised," said Howard Marlowe, the nation's most prominent coastal lobbyist. He said it would be the biggest annual expenditure since he started keeping track in 1995, and available federal records indicate no greater amounts in prior years.

On average, the government has spent from \$80 million to \$100 million annually on what has been a controversial program.

"This is an enormous vote of support," said Marlowe, noting that presidents since George H.W. Bush had sought to cut the program.

"It's not dead or even dying. It's thriving."

Of the \$148 million to be allocated for fiscal 2011, which ends Sept. 30, Marlowe estimated that \$125 million would go toward sand-pumping.

In beachfill projects, federal taxpayers historically have put up 65 percent of the costs. Critics of beachfill long have argued that the true beneficiaries are owners of coastal properties, many of which are rentals, and that the contributions to the federal economy are paltry.

"It's incredibly hypocritical," said Terry Gibson, a Florida coastal activist. "It's just a bailout for the rich who build homes in dumb places."

Supporters counter that beachfill is effective flood protection and ends up saving taxpayers money in disaster costs.

New Jersey has been a leading beneficiary, with a total of \$545 million spent by federal, state, and local governments, according to Andrew Coburn at Western Carolina University.

The new local projects include \$11.9 million to fill beaches at Atlantic City and Ventnor, and \$10.3 million for Cape May.

Contracts for those projects probably will be awarded after the summer, said Corps spokesman Stephen Rochette.