

Dredging undercuts state jetties study

By Lynn Bonner
Raleigh News & Observer
January 20, 2010

The long-lasting fight over whether the state should lift its ban on new jetties on the coast has gone to scientists for refereeing. But they may have trouble coming up with an answer, too.

A science panel is considering what has happened to beaches around Fort Macon in Carteret County and Oregon Inlet in Dare County, where jetties protect a fort and bridge. But so much sand has been dredged or added back to the areas around those study sites, scientists say, the sites may not provide useful information.

"It's been so hard to find good examples for study," said Rob Young, a panel member and professor at Western Carolina University who opposes lifting the ban. "That should tell us something. Some would like us to believe that [jetties] have been used successfully everywhere."

The state has banned such structures since 1985, and the legislature put the ban into law in 2003. North Carolina is one of two coastal states that do not allow permanent erosion-control structures.

Both sides cite Fort Macon in their arguments. Jetty opponents say the Fort Macon jetty is an example of how such structures cause downstream erosion, while supporters point to it as an example of successfully protecting property.

For several years, some beach communities have asked to be able to build jetties called terminal groins to control erosion at inlets where sand washing from beaches takes waterfront homes along with it. Opponents say the structures would cause downstream erosion, sacrificing some property owners to save others.

Report due in April

The proposal to lift the ban on permanent erosion-control structures is hung up in the legislature, so lawmakers asked the state Coastal Resources Commission to come up with recommendations on whether and how to use jetties to stop erosion.

The commission's report is due to the legislature in April. The commission will consider recommendations from the science panel.

The commission is holding public hearings as it develops the recommendation, and will need "a huge education program" to make the findings clear, said commission Vice Chairwoman Joan L. Weld.

Beach towns and communities such as Figure Eight Island and Caswell Beach have joined in the push to allow terminal groins.

Oak Island Mayor Betty Wallace said there hasn't been enough information from the study for the town to take a position. Some property owners want it, while others say that building the jetties will "steal their sand."

"We have a lot of differing opinions," she said.