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Beach residents fear loss of homes without barrier;
Engineers, environmentalists battle over whether to build structure in N.C.

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WILMINGTON, N.C. -- Waves stayed as much as 200 feet from Laura and Tom Hearn's Figure Eight Island home a decade ago. Erosion changed that. Today, the surf licks at sandbags stacked right out front.

Unless the state eases its ban on hard structures at the beach in May, the Hearn's and other island residents will have to remove the bags and will not be able to build what they say will protect their homes: a metal structure jutting into the ocean.

"Either a couple of good nor'easters or a hurricane, (and) we're probably going to have 16 houses in the water," Laura Hearn said.

The Figure Eight Island beach has become one of the nation's latest battlegrounds over whether nature can -- or should -- be tamed. Arguments over what to do about coastal erosion pit municipal officials, engineers and homeowners trying to save development against environmentalists, coastal scientists and surfers who say barriers only shift erosion to other places.

The winners of such arguments have varied from state to state.

*Sea walls and other structures aimed at keeping beaches from washing away line the coasts of California and New Jersey.

*Florida stepped up its approval of erosion-fighting structures after the hurricanes of 2004 and 2005, said Chad Nelsen of the Surfrider Foundation, which advocates for environmental causes on behalf of surfers.

*States including Oregon, Texas, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Maine and both North and South Carolina restrict such projects. Despite the Maine restriction, Congress authorized a breakwater last year off the coast of Maine, where dozens of homes are threatened.

*This year, the North Carolina Legislature will weigh whether to loosen the state ban and allow regulators to consider a barrier called a terminal groin as a pilot project on Figure Eight, where residents would pay for it, or in another spot.

Andy Coburn, a researcher at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, N.C., said pressure on policymakers for protection has grown with the wealth of coastal residents nationwide. He views the trend as dangerous.

"You're basically opening up Pandora's box for additional problems," Coburn said. "Before you know it, you have an engineered shoreline."

Tom Campbell, president of Coastal Planning and Engineering, senses some new willingness in Florida and elsewhere to consider the barriers his company builds, as long as they are used "surgically." Overuse has left states generally hostile to them, he said. States prefer to replenish their beaches with more and more sand.

Figure Eight has contracted with Tom Jarrett, a Coastal Planning and Engineering engineer, who said a groin perpendicular to the beach at the northern end of the island would keep sand from washing into the inlet and allow the beach to build up again in front of the homes.

The North Carolina legislation passed the state Senate last year and could be taken up by the House as early as May. A political committee formed by Figure Eight homeowners has given more than \$45,000 to state candidates and the state Democratic Party since 2004, according to campaign filings.

Jarrett said a single, small groin would not cause damage like the large structures placed "helter-skelter" around the country in the past -- such as at Sandy Hook in New Jersey, where 19th-century sea walls and groins helped ocean currents wash away sand.

Maine's proposed structure -- a jetty spur meant to save dozens of homes from falling into the ocean near the mouth of the Saco River -- wouldn't run afoul of the state ban because of its location offshore, State Geologist Robert Marvinney said. Like many erosion-control projects, it would be built by the Army Corps of Engineers but would need a state permit. Congress authorized up to \$26.9 million for it last year, corps project manager Richard Heidebrecht said.

A 19th-century jetty has caused the erosion that has destroyed homes in Saco, he said.

"It's so hard to know what these structures will do in the course of their long lifetimes," said Joe Kelley of the University of Maine, who opposes the structure in Saco.

He also joined more than 40 colleagues in signing a letter opposing the kind of groin proposed for North Carolina.

Geologic change, he said, is "not in sync with our life spans, or certainly our political process."

Schrader reports for the Asheville (N.C.) Citizen-Times