

Managing Threatened Oceanfront Structures - Interagency Work Group

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Vision. To proactively address threats to public health and safety, environmental resources, and public enjoyment of ocean beaches, including National Seashores, by ensuring that appropriate regulatory, legal, insurance, and financial mechanisms exist to address oceanfront structures imminently threatened by erosion.

Mission. Co-led by the NC Department of Environmental Quality and the National Park Service's Cape Hatteras National Seashore, the interagency work group will engage with partner organizations and stakeholders to identify, research, and recommend policies and programs to establish a proactive, holistic, predictable, and coordinated approach to erosion-threatened structures.

Relevance. North Carolina has over 320 miles of oceanfront beaches, including 133 miles within the Cape Hatteras and Cape Lookout National Seashores and managed by the National Park Service. Oceanfront development activities are subject to unique federal, state, and local regulations and permits, including construction setbacks based on local erosion rates established by the N.C. Division of Coastal Management (DCM). Still, oceanfront houses and other structures can gradually encroach onto public beaches following years of chronic erosion and storm events. Based on a recent DCM review of 2020 imagery, over 750 of approximately 8,777 oceanfront structures were considered at risk from oceanfront erosion (no dunes or vegetation between the structure and ocean), and this situation is anticipated to worsen with increasing sea level rise and coastal storms.

When structures are imminently threatened by beach erosion, various regulatory, legal, insurance, and financial assistance measures create uncertainty for property owners and coastal managers. While permitting conflicts and legal disputes linger for these properties, structures on the beach can pose significant risks to public health and safety, impacts to aquatic species and shorebirds and their habitats, and interference with public use of the beach. Often, no action is taken until after a house collapses. Recent examples in Rodanthe, NC are reminders that a single home collapse can result in debris for up to fifteen miles along the coast, potential for contamination from septic systems, injuries to beach visitors, and a range of environmental concerns. In addition, the debris associated with structure collapses requires large-scale, expensive clean-up efforts. These recent collapses illustrate the need for a more holistic and proactive approach to addressing erosion-threatened structures.

Outcomes. The Work Group will hold virtual meetings and virtual public workshops throughout 2023 to identify short-term and long-term actions and produce a final report outlining key recommendations for improved financial assistance measures, regulations, legislative authorities, and insurance-related policies or programs, including needed engagement and outreach strategies at the federal, state, and local levels.

Membership. Federal agencies: National Park Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Wilmington District, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. State agencies: NC Dept. of Environmental Quality, including the Division of Coastal Management, Division of Waste Management, and Division of Marine Fisheries; NC Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health; NC Department of Public Safety, including the NC Office of Recovery and Resiliency and NC Emergency Management, and N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. Local Governments: Dare County; Town of Nags Head.