

Beach erosion could cost S.C.

Groups want state to help pay for renourishment; others say it's a waste of money

The Associated Press

CHARLESTON - Unless Congress decides to spend money on beach renourishment projects, the next wave of beach erosion could hit South Carolina's wallet.

But getting state money for those projects has become more difficult.

For instance, last year, Gov. Mark Sanford vetoed state money for the Hunting Island State Park's renourishment project, saying it would be like throwing \$5 million into the Atlantic Ocean. The Legislature overrode that veto.

"The beach is everything. It is a tremendous revenue producer; it's what draws people to Charleston," says LaJuan Kennedy, broker-in-charge at Fred Holland Realty, which manages many of the rental houses on Folly Beach.

There's no doubt there's a problem that threatens parts of a \$14 billion tourism industry that thrives along the coast. Grand Strand beaches can lose 6 inches of sand each year, and Charleston's barrier islands can lose as much as 2 feet. It's worse when high seas and winds and hurricanes churn away at the sand.

Parts of Folly, Edisto and Sullivan's islands have no beach at high tide when surf laps against dunes. Hunting Island, one of only two public beaches on the state's southern coast, lost 40 feet of sand last year.

At Folly Island, Kennedy says business hasn't dropped off yet, but if erosion isn't dealt with, "there will be no beach for people to get on."

Folly Beach has two federal projects in the pipeline for storm damage repair and renourishment. They'll cost about \$14 million. Lisa Metheney, a planner with the Army Corps of Engineers, says the agency wants to do both jobs at the same time this spring and save about \$1 million.

Supporters say that even if they have to pump 1 million cubic yards of sand onto their beaches every decade, doing so more than pays for itself in tourism and economic activity. More than 120,000 jobs in South Carolina are directly tied to the tourist trade.

"I don't see how the governmental agencies can turn their back on one of the greatest assets the state has," Edisto Beach Mayor Burley Lyons says.

Edisto Beach has raised half the \$750,000 needed for a renourishment feasibility study. That's a requirement now to get federal funding. The work there is expected to cost \$6 million, and the town will have to come up with more money.

With 80 percent of the island's 2,400 homes rental properties, Edisto has little choice. Without a beach, there is no tax base.

Not far away, trees litter the Hunting Island beach like fallen soldiers, and the twisted plumbing of an old restroom juts out of the ground. The dunes drop off like cliffs, where there are dunes at all. The island draws 1.2 million visitors a year, and people wait for years to rent modest beachfront cabins there.

"We lost 40 or 50 feet of beach in a couple of weeks" last year, says Ashley Berry, assistant park manager at Hunting Island. "You could sit here and watch foot after foot of these dunes break off."

Park officials are worried that the ocean will cut into the lagoon on the south end of the island. When that happens, Hunting Island will effectively be cut in two.

Orrin Pilkey, a Duke University geologist, says islands should be allowed to erode and accrete as nature intends, and that taxpayer dollars should not be used for renourishment or to bail out property owners who persist in the "foolish act" of building on the shore of a constantly evolving barrier island.

That reasoning was partly why Sanford vetoed the \$5 million to help rebuild Hunting Island's beach.

"We were shocked when he vetoed that money," says Roberta Gunderson, president of the Friends of Hunting Island. "He's very familiar with the beach. He went there as a kid; his mother still lives in the area. He knows it's the only public beach in northern Beaufort County."

Sanford spokesman Will Folks said even state law considers erosion a natural process, and there is little hope of circumventing nature.

"One storm could completely wipe out a renourishment project like this one," Folks said. "This is not going to stop coastal drift."