

[OPINIONS & IDEAS]

ORRIN H. PILKEY

Can we save our eroding shore?

The much-anticipated fourth United Nations climate-change panel summary report on global climate change has finally arrived.

The conclusion – that global warming is viewed as “unequivocal” – brings the strongest support yet for the role of humans as a cause.

The report also states that the rate of sea level rise accelerated in the past 10 years; a short-term observation but possibly the beginning of an expected global acceleration.

These declarations come on the heels of warnings by Jeffress Williams of the U.S. Geological Survey and Stan Riggs of East Carolina University that North Carolina’s Outer Banks island chain is particularly vulnerable to sea level rise and could be virtually wiped out by a big storm.

What more warning is needed before the state is finally convinced to take action to preserve our beaches and coasts for future generations?

While big changes are in store, it’s business as usual along the coast, where a seemingly omnipotent cadre of shortsighted legislators, bureaucrats, property owners and development interests remains intent on trying to hold an eroding shoreline in one place.

Take the problem of N.C. 12, for example. The state Department of Transportation is now building sandbag seawalls to protect the Outer Banks road from storms.

But as sure as the sun will set, this sandbag wall will have to be repaired, replaced and lengthened in coming years, unless the highway is moved back.

On Oak Island, the Coastal Resources Commission granted a variance to allow construction of buildings on two oceanfront lots that were technically unbuildable

**What more
warning is needed
before the state is
finally convinced to
take action?**

because of the state’s coastal setback line.

Even the Division of Coastal Management argued against the variance, recognizing that such a decision would open the door to hundreds of additional variances.

All along our coast the building boom continues, as more and more mom-and-pop cottages are replaced by multimillion-dollar mini-mansions that serve as huge rental cash cows for a few individuals who are secure in the belief that the state will continue to pour money into “beach nourishment.”

As the need to hold shorelines in place has increased, beach nourishment has become more frequent.

But nourishment is more than just a costly burden to taxpayers. It is also damaging to our beaches.

The beach in Holden Beach was covered by layers of mud and pieces of asphalt, some with yellow lines still on them.

In Carolina Beach, a recent nourishment project pumped a wide variety of trash up on the beach.

At Bogue and Shallotte Inlets, sand continues to be mined from the tidal deltas, a process sure to increase long term erosion rates.

Regardless of the state’s problematic coastal development history, there’s still time to fun-

damentally rethink the future of our shorelines.

Here’s what various players can do:

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY AND COASTAL RESOURCES COMMISSION: Stop the high-rise madness as sea level continues to rise. A community that chooses not to prevent high-rise development should pay for its nourishment projects.

THE COASTAL RESOURCES COMMISSION: Enforce the state’s new beach nourishment sand-quality standard. In the past five years North Carolina has had six poor-quality beach nourishment projects, tops in the nation.

THE COASTAL RESOURCES COMMISSION: Enforce state regulations requiring sandbag removal after two years. Areas of South Nags Head have had sandbags in place for more than 15 years (and now no beach at mid tide).

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY: Provide funds to enforce – and then actually enforce – sound environmental laws.

THE DOT: Save the seashore along Hatteras Island by building the “long bridge” alternative and putting N.C. 12 on the sound side of the island.

THE GOVERNOR: Don’t allow foxes to guard the henhouse. Empower the Coastal Resources Commission by not appointing roughly an equal number of pro- and anti-development members.

EVERYONE: Listen to the state’s global warming commission.

These moves are just a start. But the longer we wait to do something, the more difficult it will be.

Orrin H. Pilkey, who has written widely on coastal geology and barrier islands, is James B. Duke professor emeritus at Duke University.