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Draft Groin Study Requires Thorough Peer Review

OCEAN – The N.C. Coastal Resources Commission spent \$300,000 on a report that proponents of building small jetties on our beaches hoped would show that these so-called “terminal groins” are everywhere protecting expensive beachfront property without destroying the beach in the process.

The draft of the report is out. Here’s one of its conclusions: “Under particular conditions, it may be possible to limit adverse effects with terminal structures without detrimental effects to the adjacent shorelines.”

Not exactly a ringing endorsement.

The commission had hoped to study at least eight terminal groins at inlets along the East and Gulf coasts. Its consultant could find just five – and two of those are in the Gulf of Mexico, a calm lake compared to our Atlantic shoreline. Two of the study sites are in North Carolina, at Oregon and Beaufort inlets.

“The take-home message is that we just spent \$300,000 to study just five structures in places that are nothing like where we want to build them here,” said Andy Coburn, associate director of the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines at Western Carolina University. “There aren’t dozens of these things out there. Even at the limited sites included in the study the conclusions are equivocal.”

“The commission’s advisory panels then have their work cut out for them to address shortcomings in the draft report,” said Todd Miller, the executive director of the N.C. Coastal Federation.

The non-profit environmental group called on the commission’s Science Panel on Coastal Hazards and its appointed sub-committee to carefully review the report so that the final version will do what the N.C. General Assembly envisioned when it ordered the study last year: Offer meaningful guidance on using small jetties at inlets to control erosion along the state’s beaches.

“It’s bloated,” Miller said of the 471-page report. “It is full of ‘data’ that is useless in terms of evaluating the feasibility of building terminal groins. Any data that cannot be used to develop findings and conclusions need to be removed.”

The report looks at the environmental and economic effects of the five groins. Such structures are no longer normally allowed along our beaches because their environmental effects can’t be accurately predicted. They can destroy the beach by increasing erosion. The

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ban has been the bedrock of the state's development policies along the beaches, but several beach towns and homeowners associations have lobbied the legislature to change the rule to allow these small jetties. The legislature responded by ordering the Coastal Resources Commission to do a study that would determine whether groins are feasible options to control erosion.

But wading through the draft report, which can be found on the N.C. Division of Coastal Management's [Web site](#), uncovers numerous shortcomings and several glaring omissions, Miller said. It contains, for instance, a number of inconsistencies that aren't explained and conclusions that aren't supported by data.

Moffatt & Nichol, the engineering consultants that did the report for the commission, cites dozens of scientific and engineering reports and analysis done by others but makes no judgments as to their accuracy or reliability, as is usually done in such reports. By treating all information as equal, the report offers a confusing mountain of data that offers little guidance to the policymakers on the commission, Miller noted.

Neither does the report include accelerated sea-level rise in its analysis of groins' environmental or economic effects. Scientists forecast that the ocean by the end of this century could be three feet higher than it is now because of global warming. That's triple the historic rise. The state's Division of Coastal Management recently released its own similar forecasts. Accelerated sea-level rise affects erosion, the cost of building and maintaining groins and the frequency of projects to pump sand on beaches. Yet, the report assumes that the ocean in the future will behave as it has in the past.

The report notes that groins are successful in stopping inlets from migrating, but then is silent on the environmental consequences of interfering with the very basis of natural beaches. "Inlets migrate naturally," Miller explained. "What are the long-term implications of disrupting inlet migration on barrier islands and habitat? This is a question that should be answered by the report given all the experts involved."

In its current form, the report does little to settle the debate, Miller said. "It certainly doesn't provide the guidance the commission needs to decide whether to allow these structures on our beaches," he said.

It will up to commission's panel of scientific and engineering experts to shore up the report if it has any hope of meeting the legislature's intent, but the panel is scheduled to meet only twice more to discuss the report before it is presented to the legislature on April 1. The commission's subcommittee comprised of its members and advisors will also meet twice before April. The commission also has only two meetings – including a day-long session on Feb. 17 – to determine the policy implications of the report.

The April deadline provided little time to do the job right, said Coburn, who has attended all of the commission's science panel meetings. "The whole thing was rushed," he said. "They didn't have enough time to do an adequate job and we won't have enough time to evaluate it."

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