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Federation Asks for Perdue's Help on Beach Policy

Ocean – The N.C. Coastal Resources Commission's recent non-conclusive vote on the controversial issue of allowing terminal groins to be built on our beaches is very disappointing, noted the leader of the state's top coastal environmental group. Given the commission's inability to lead on this issue, he is asking Gov. Beverly Perdue to spearhead a more rational course for protecting our beaches.

The commission, which sets development rules along the coast, didn't support the state's longtime ban on oceanfront jetties, groins and seawalls when it voted Thursday at its meeting in Sunset Beach on policy recommendations that the N.C. General Assembly requested. Neither did the commission endorse the structures. It instead tried to find a middle ground by suggesting that the legislature, if it amends the law, require applicants to meet a list of environmental and economic conditions.

After heavy lobbying by some beach communities that want to build groins at inlets to control erosion, a bill to allow them passed the N.C. Senate but stalled in the N.C. House. To break the logjam, the legislature ordered the commission to study the issue and submit policy recommendations by April 1.

"The legislature was looking for guidance, and this vote offers very little," said Todd Miller, the executive director of the N.C. Coastal Federation. "The commission essentially punted. About the best that could be said for the commission's action is that it doesn't recommend doing away with the ban."

The commission, Miller noted, was supposed to base its recommendations on a recently completed [report](#) of groins that was done by an engineering firm at a cost of almost \$300,000. The study could find few examples of these structures in the Southeast and couldn't determine that they could be used without causing damage.

"It was by no means a ringing endorsement of groins," Miller said. "The study was helpful in detailing the uncertainties about the consequences of building these things. Those uncertainties should have been red flags for commission."

Groins can increase erosion farther down the beach and can destroy habitat needed by fish and other wildlife. The effects might be seen decades after the structures are built and can't be accurately predicted. For those reasons, the state has wisely chosen not to allow them to be built in most cases along the oceanfront for the last 25 years, Miller said.

"The report does nothing to ease those concerns," he said. "It offers no compelling reason to change policy. The commission should have recognized that and recommended that the ban remain in place."

Instead the legislature will likely decide the issue without any clear guidance from the commission, Miller said. If the issue comes up again when the legislature convenes in May, he said that he hopes that Perdue take an active role to follow up on a statement she made while running for governor in 2008.

She told the N.C. Conservation Council then that she supported retaining the ban, and her spokesperson said recently that the governor hasn't changed her mind.

"We need for Gov. Perdue to help retain a judicious and wise state policy," Miller said.

A great deal of effort is being expended to allow these groins, he said. It's a short-sighted remedy that offers no long-term relief in an era of rising seas. The state's own Division of Coastal Management recently predicted that the rate of sea-level at the end of this century will be triple the historic rate because of global warming.

"Even if the legislature were to allow these groins, it will be years before one is ever built," Miller said. "Applicants would likely have to do detailed studies and meet a long list of requirements. It will be a long and very expensive process."

A more rational approach, he said, is to devise policies and funding sources that allow beach communities to buy time and protect oceanfront properties while programs are developed that allow them to adapt to the new environment. Limiting high-rise buildings on the oceanfront, promoting family beaches and helping property owners self-finance their relocation out of harm's way are among the sweeping recommendations that a diverse set of stakeholders came up with last year at a retreat sponsored by the federation. You can read their report on our [Web site](#).

"These recommendations aren't controversial and offer real hope for lasting change," Miller said. "They are far better than pursuing stop-gap measures that will be expensive, fractious and, in the end, won't work.

"Until all the diverse stakeholders start working together to address the threats facing our beaches we will all be losers," he said. "Property owners will spend huge sums of money in losing efforts to protect their investments, and the public will have increasingly degraded beaches. We need the governor to step forward and lead us out of this quagmire."