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Figure Eight Groin Could Destroy Popular Beach-Access, Boating Area

OCEAN -- If approved by state and federal regulators, a massive seawall and terminal groin proposed at the north end of Figure Eight Island next to Rich Inlet will do more than simply fortify a few dozen houses from erosion. It will cover a sand spit that is now a popular boating and beach recreation destination with rapidly moving tidal waters, making it impossible or extremely dangerous for people to walk from the backside of the inlet to the ocean.

“The huge sand spit that now forms the end of Figure Eight Island will be completely gone within a few years after the groin is built,” says Mike Giles, a coastal advocate for the N.C. Coastal Federation. “That’s not our opinion. It is exactly what’s predicted by the project’s paid consultants in the impact study they prepared.”

A public hearing on that draft environmental impact statement will be held Thursday at Ogden Elementary School, 3637 Middle Sound Loop Rd., in New Hanover County starting at 6:30 p.m.

The Figure Eight Island Homeowners Association proposes to build a 900-foot long sheet pile and rock seawall and a 700-foot long terminal groin that will become its shoreline from sound to sea at Rich Inlet. The purpose of the seawall and terminal groin is to maintain the property values of a few dozen oceanfront homes. It will also soon become the dividing line between private residential lots and public trust waters of the inlet.

Before the groin and seawall receive the necessary federal permits, the Army Corps of Engineers must first produce a study that outlines alternatives to the project and describes its consequences. The draft of this study has been prepared for the Corps by the same consultants that the homeowners association may hire to design the project, prepare permit applications and oversee its construction.

The consultants have been working with Figure Eight Island for many years to conduct beach studies and beach fill projects and promote a state law to allow the use of a terminal groin at Rich Inlet. The N.C. General Assembly passed a law last year to allow up to four of these jetties to be built at inlets along the beach.

“We are quite disturbed after our preliminary review of the draft study,” said Giles. “It contains inconsistencies, flaws in logic, bogus claims and reveals a deep-seated terminal groin biases that makes the study virtually worthless.”

Among the numerous problems, the federation found that the study and its appendixes:

- Predicts naively that the terminal groin and 4,000 feet of beach fill will prevent all property from damage over the next 30 years along more than 12,000 feet of shoreline. This ignores catastrophic erosion from large storms that cannot be prevented by a groin and beach fill.
- Proposes to hold the terminal groin harmless even if massive amounts of erosion occur on the northern half of the island over the next 30 years.
- Contains many errors and inconsistencies including two very different descriptions of its preferred terminal groin alternative. One version claims that beach re-nourishment will be needed over 4,000 feet of beach every five years, and a second description states that re-nourishment may be needed over as much longer stretch of beach every four years. This discrepancy has significant implications regarding the cost of maintaining the groin.
- Contains a cost and benefit analysis that fails to include realistic property damage estimates for all alternatives, thus unfairly skewing the analysis in favor of the terminal groin option since

it does not account for property damage and added beach re-nourishment that is likely to occur as a result of storms.

- Fails to acknowledge the potential for the main channel of the inlet to take on a configuration similar to its position in 1945 after the terminal groin is built. This could cause massive erosion along the northern end of the island.
- Shows that the preferred alternative will adversely modify designated critical habitat for the federally listed piping plover in violation of the Endangered Species Act.
- Overstates the costs of moving the inlet channel in Rich Inlet compared to what it actually cost to move inlet channels at Mason and Bogue Inlets especially if the inlet is not relied upon as a source of sand for beach re-nourishment.

“The federation will submit extensive written comments on the draft EIS by the comment deadline on July 6,” says Giles. “These and other flaws in the study will be fully exposed through our forthcoming comment letter, and if needed, subsequent legal challenges of the study and any federal or state regulatory approvals granted to construct a terminal groin at Rich Inlet.”