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Surfers fighting to keep waves

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Next year, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will begin replenishing the shores of Long Beach Island. Most consider it a godsend.

On some parts of the island, erosion is so bad because of bad storms, homes have teetered on the brink of the sea.

But Long Beach Island is 18 miles long - plenty long to harbor dissent, even on an issue of such seeming popularity as beach replenishment.

In particular, area surfers and fishermen are fretting over the replenishment plan.

The Army Corps of Engineers has replenished the beaches in many places before tackling LBI.

In other towns, a drastic decrease in the surf followed a replenishment project. Harold Wooley, administrator for Long Branch, remembers what happened in 1994 after the corps replenished most of the beaches in Monmouth County, Ocean County's neighbor to the north.

"When (the corps) placed the sand initially ... the surf break in many areas was shot," he said. "Many surfing areas have since come back. Have they come back as good? I don't know. I'm not a surfer."

"There were some great spots," said John Weber, the East Coast regional manager for the Surfrider Foundation. "It's gone. I can't talk about how the waves were smaller (after replenishment) because there were none."

The Surfrider Foundation is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving oceans, waves and beaches, its Web site says. The group also lobbies on related legislation.

On Long Beach Island, a sand bar about 50 to 75 yards out to sea reliably runs the length of the island, many said.

"If you go up in a helicopter, you can see it at low tide. I've flown above it," said Craig Henry, a pilot, assistant superintendent for the Southern Regional School District and an avid surfer.

This sandbar allows for rideable waves, Henry and other surfers said. "It makes a breaking wave that wouldn't otherwise break until it hits shore. And you can ride that wave for a much longer period of time.

"So here's my concern: They're going to pump in all this material on to the beach. If in fact over time that fills in the area between the sand bar and the beach, we lose that sand bar effect."

Anglers also are concerned. In some areas, beach replenishment fill proved to be poor quality, said Kevin Cook, a 39-year-old island fisherman from Long Beach Township.

The orange sand discolored the water and fish shied away from the replenished area, he said.

"It's garbage sand," said Greg Cudnik, an island resident whose family owns Fisherman's Headquarters, a local bait-and-tackle shop. "I don't consider it replenishment. I consider it dumping."

Cudnik, like surfers, is wary of losing the trench between the beach and sand bar. That trench, he said, is a prized area for surf fishermen.

"You need the trench," Cudnick said. "It'll take a long time for habitat on the bottom to come back if they bury it under tons of sand."

The trench habitat he said, attracts bait fish, which in turn, attract the bass and blues coveted by surf anglers.

On Dec. 3, 50 volunteers, under the direction of the Surfrider Foundation, set upon LBI's beaches to conduct what it is called a Beachscape.

They charted sandbars, jetties, and the length of the beach from the highwater mark using tape measures.

The exercise's intent, according to Weber, is to build a credible case for why the corps should modify its replenishment design in select areas.

"In our minds, you have to come up with some sort of reason why we think the waves are better here and why we think a different design will work."

There are alternatives, Weber said, because the corps' design can be modified to minimally impact the trench and rideable wave effect.

The state Department of Environmental Protection has seemingly vowed to accommodate the surfers.

Last week, Karen Hershey, a DEP spokeswoman, said the department "will identify with the Surfrider (Foundation) locations where it will try to modify the Army Corps designs to make for better breaks."

The corps is more equivocal.

"We are always looking for input on how to build a better beach," corps spokesman Merv Brokke said. "There are limits to what we can do, though."

"We have to look at (the Surfriders') plan. I haven't seen it. I know they been discussing this with DEP. ... We're looking to see if it is cost-feasible."

While Brokke said he was not just paying lip service, history has shown that changing the corps' design is not an easy task.

The Monmouth County project in 1994 replenished nearly the entire beachfront from Sandy Hook to the Manasquan Inlet - aside from one notable exception: The tiny town of Loch Arbor refused to allow the corps to enact its plan.

Loch Arbor is unique. No Loch Arbor homes sit within 250 feet of the ocean at high tide.

Also, its mayor, Bill Rosenblatt, is an avid surfer and his writings are prominently featured on the Surfrider Foundation's Web site.

Rosenblatt said the town made a calculated decision. Aware of how replenishment might alter the surf, he told the corps: "Thank you, but no."

Rosenblatt said Loch Arbor's beaches still have not been replenished.

On numerous occasions, Rosenblatt said Loch Arbor officials asked the corps to change the design. It did

not.

"The Army Corps is unwilling to modify the plan," he said. "We submitted our own modifications and they don't give us an answer other than, 'It's not feasible.' They never say why."

Comment from the corps about its affairs in Loch Arbor was not available Sunday.

There are economic considerations to consider, as well, surfers said.

Shortly after replenishment in Long Branch, three local surf shops closed, Wooley said. Two others have since opened, and Wooley did not directly attribute replenishment to the closures.

"A lot of things contribute to a shop going out of business," Wooley said.

When interviewed about a year ago, most Long Beach Island surf shops declined to comment. Ron Jon Surf Shop, perhaps the most prominent such store on LBI, declined to comment this week about the corps' project.

Ellen Johnson, executive director of the Southern Ocean County Chamber of Commerce, said the surfers "are looking at the short term. Definitely there will be some disturbance, but once Mother Nature takes her course ... the waves will be back."

She said the pre-eminent concern is the loss of more beach. "It's going to get too small for people to enjoy. ... That's the real concern."

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