

EXPERT ADVICE: Engineers, scientists from across U.S. gather in Long Branch, discuss efforts to protect coastline

Battling nature: Beach protection experts gather at Shore

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LONG BRANCH — Hurricane Katrina was a devastating natural disaster but one that scientists and engineers can learn from, according to presenters Monday at a national conference about the coastal economy and ecology.

The conference — which brought together about 140 scientists and engineers from across the country — also drew protests from about 50 people, including representatives of the Surfrider Foundation, a national coastal environmental group critical of some beach replenishment efforts.

The American Shore & Beach Preservation Association's fall conference was held to discuss, among other things, lessons learned from Katrina and how coastal communities can make adjustments in future projects to protect beaches.

One of the more obvious conclusions was that levees around New Orleans did not perform as a system when the hurricane struck in 2005, Joan Pope, technical director for civil works with the Army Corps of Engineers, told those at the conference.

"It wasn't a system," Pope said. "It was an amalgamation of parts."

The levees were built by different administrations with different levels of maintenance and lots of potential for failure, Pope said.

"If we don't start getting serious and pay attention to what's going on and, most importantly, (be) willing to confront the compromises and sacrifices . . . I think we're going to simply revisit the harsh lessons of the land," Michael Weinstein, president and CEO of the New Jersey Marine Sciences Consortium.

Steps can be taken

But there are certain steps coastal communities can take to prepare beaches for storm and erosion damage, said Wayne Lasch, a civil and coastal engineer with Florida-based PBS&J. He specializes in disaster response.

Among those steps: passing local ordinances aimed at coastal protection to help make municipalities more open to federal funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and other government offices.

Conferring with other engineers and scientists who have gone through storm replenishment projects is key, Lasch said. Those that have gone through the process can supply a wealth of knowledge because they know firsthand the necessary steps to take when applying for aid, he said.

The ASBPA, an organization that has been around for 80 years, is primarily concerned with beach management and restoration.

The Corps of Engineers' \$210 million project to reduce coastal storm damage targets, in part, some 21 miles of shoreline from Sea Bright to Manasquan Inlet, said Lynn M. Bocamazo, a senior coastal engineer. Studies of those beaches have been completed, but work to replenish them is not done, she said.

Surfers take exception

Many of those beach replenishment efforts are opposed by the Surfrider Foundation because they make the beaches less safe for users, said John Weber, the group's East Coast regional manager. Surfrider members were among the protesters who demonstrated outside the conference site, the Ocean Place Resort and Spa, earlier Monday.

By widening the beaches, the projects create a "steep and deep" beach, Weber said. Instead of a gradual decline into the water, steeper drops put bathers at risk, he said.

The projects also create a negative cycle of development, Weber said.

"Part of the project gives rise to more vulnerable coastal development," he said.

Inevitably after a beach replenishment project, development of homes or businesses occur, which then causes more damage to the beaches, thereby creating more need for replenishment, he said.

In a statement released by ASBPA on Monday, the group said it welcomes opportunities to work with Surfrider to further its common mission to protect the beaches of America.

The three-day conference continues today.

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