

3. PROPOSED POLICY POSITION

COMBATTING COASTAL EROSION

BACKGROUND

Coastal erosion is an ongoing problem for shoreline regions around the world. Ongoing destruction wrought by recent hurricanes and other storms, as well as the enduring oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, is a reminder of the delicate nature of the Gulf states' coastal regions and wetlands. Regionally and nationally significant ecological and economic assets are beset by coastal erosion, which is exacerbated by various natural and anthropogenic causes. Major hurricanes are the predominant cause of erosion, as the coastline and barrier islands absorb the initial impact of the storm and are subsequently washed away in the process. These coastal features serve as the region's primary defense against hurricanes, as they weaken the storm and lessen the impact on coastal communities. Disruptions to the natural sediment flow, such as dredging canals and alterations to intricate levee systems, play a major part in this erosive damage as well. A recent study by the federal Minerals Management Services indicates that infrastructure, including oil and gas pipelines that cut through coastal wetlands, also can contribute to coastal erosion.

According to the International Erosion Control Association, the Gulf Coast is losing an average of six feet every year to erosion, with some regions experiencing losses as great as 70 feet per year. Government officials, engineers, environmental groups and the general public must work together to address this dilemma. However, long-term erosion defense and repair may require millions of dollars, a daunting obligation for states during these economically stressed times. Therefore, it is advantageous for states to share innovative ideas and successful approaches to combating coastal erosion.

For instance, coastal communities in North Carolina and Virginia have employed a method of deploying oyster shells offshore to attract aquatic life such as algae, worms and fish, thereby creating a "living shoreline" that alleviates erosion. Other "living shoreline" projects have been developed in Florida, Texas and in Chesapeake Bay states. Innumerable scientific studies have shown that vegetation helps strengthen sand and soil against erosion. In particular, native plants are effective in combating coastal erosion in many areas, but such vegetation must be cultivated and allowed to flourish. It is imperative to seriously review the threat posed to American coasts and wetlands and continue to develop effective and innovative methods of combating this damage.

RECOMMENDATION

The Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments urges the Obama administration and the United States Congress to evaluate the environmental and economic impacts that coastal erosion has on the Southern region and the nation. In addition to seeking funding for coastal restoration and protection, it is imperative for states to commission studies to better understand the region's erosion problems. Further, the Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments urges the United States Congress take immediate action to accelerate the deployment and use of federal support for coastal region throughout the South. The Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments requests that a copy of this policy position be forwarded to the Southern Congressional delegation, president of the United States and the Environmental Protection Agency administrator.