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Communities Threatened By Sea Level Rise May Get Help — If Congress Can Pass Legislation

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In the last 80 years, Louisiana alone has lost an area of coastal land the size of Delaware.

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Thursday, behind closed doors, House and Senate conferees are meeting to negotiate an important provision in the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) — an investment

mechanism for the oceans, coasts, and Great Lakes known as a National Endowment for the Oceans. One of the few bipartisan bills this Congress, WRDA is one that is expected to pass before the end of the year.

Proponents of the measure say creating an endowment for the oceans will provide critical resources and capacity to conserve and restore coastal wetlands. "For all the coastal states, this is really big," emphasized Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI).

"We need to relocate critical infrastructure, like water treatment plants and bridges, which are now at risk of being washed away. The National Endowment for the Oceans, Coasts, and Great Lakes can help coastal states and communities protect more of this infrastructure, protect more habitat that sustains our fisheries, conduct more research, and clean more waters and beaches. The need is great and we must respond."

In addition, the measure would help cities and local governments prepare for the increasing vulnerability of coastal infrastructure such as roads, sewage treatment plants, and energy facilities to the effects of climate change. Written throughout the provision are ways to do this, including "planning for and managing coastal development to enhance ecosystem integrity or minimize impacts from sea level change and coastal erosion" and "protection and relocation of critical coastal public infrastructure affected by erosion or sea level change."

When seven football fields of coastal wetlands disappear every hour, calculated between 2004 and 2009 by a recent report from NOAA, it's a serious problem. The report identifies human activity, mostly urban and rural development, as one of the main causes. Loss of these wetlands is further putting pressure on coastal communities already threatened by rising seas.

Sea level will most likely rise between 1.5 and 3 feet by the end of this century, which is greater than the conservative projections from the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, as recently concluded in a survey of ninety experts. Not only is that going to displace people along the coast, but the billions of dollars that have been invested in infrastructure will be in jeopardy.

In the last 80 years, Louisiana alone has lost an area of coastal land the size of Delaware, much of which had comprised barrier islands that served a critical role defending against hurricanes and storm surge. The same thing is happening in South Carolina where 1,200

acres have been lost in the last 25 years. And on the shorelines of Alaska, indigenous villages are retreating as they see their houses and schools sink into the ground and the sea sneaks closer with erosion rates reaching up to 100 feet a year.

“Climate doesn’t change in a nice, linear way,” says James White from the University of Colorado Boulder on the release of a National Research Council report on Tuesday. “There are thresholds and tipping points in the system. If we cross one of those, handling or adapting to that is going to be a challenge. When it comes to adaptations, speed kills.

Grappling with protection of coastal communities and what is needed for adaptation is not easy. In four densely-populated southeast Florida counties — Palm Beach, Miami-Dade, Broward, and Monroe — \$4 billion in taxable real estate and over five million people are at risk from only one foot of sea level rise, which is projected before the end of the century.

Lawmakers are pushing for a funding mechanism, such as a National Endowment for the Oceans, as a way to support communities faced with these challenges.

The idea of a National Endowment for the Oceans stems from a recommendation made by the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, comprised of members appointed by President George W. Bush. “When the commission first floated the idea of an ocean trust fund in a draft report and asked governors for comment, support was overwhelming and bipartisan,” wrote Tom Allen, former Representative from Maine.

Sen. Whitehouse has led the latest push for an oceans fund, creating a place for the bipartisan initiative on the docket. Passed by a vote of 67-32 in the Senate, the National Endowment for the Oceans is an amendment in the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA), a behemoth of a bill to fund the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Both the Senate and House passed versions of WRDA, yet the House bill fell short on including any language supporting direct investments in the oceans.

While the Whitehouse amendment to include the endowment wouldn’t actually set aside any funding, it would create the framework for federal support and management tools to help communities effectively adapt to these challenges of coastal land use and the threats posed by sea level rise. And this is where a dedicated stream of funding for ocean, coastal, and Great Lakes priorities can help. The proposed National Endowment for the Oceans would grant at least 59 percent of its annual funds to coastal states, factoring in total shoreline and population densities for a balanced distribution, to help restore, protect, and understand their coasts. It would also support needed research for

science and monitoring of our ocean, providing better certainty for management of policies such as catch limits crucial to the fishing industry.

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