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Beaches are the First Line of Defense against Hurricanes

FORT MYERS, FL – It’s hurricane season, so it’s highly possible that America’s coastal residents may soon be experiencing the howling winds and crashing waves associated with one of Mother Nature’s most dangerous weather events. National coastal experts want coastal residents to understand the vital role their beach plays in protecting them from the negative impacts of a hurricane.

“The beach is your first line of defense against a hurricane,” says Tim Kana, Ph.D., president of Coastal Science & Engineering in Columbia, S.C. “The key to this protection is a wide, sandy beach and established vegetated dunes that work together to absorb much of the energy of waves.”

Kana points out that sand and dunes can not prevent storm surge, but that a wide beach helps to dissipate the waves and allows less energy to reach structures and infrastructure on upland properties behind the beach.

As evidence of the effectiveness of a wide beach and high dunes, he points to Hurricane Hugo, which hit the coast of South Carolina in 1989. “After the storm, it was clear that the areas that suffered the worst storm damage were those where the dunes were low and the beach was critically eroded before the storm,” Kana said.

The 1987 New Year’s Day nor’easter in the Carolinas similarly proved the value of a healthy beach. Three adjacent beach communities all lost an average of about 40 feet in the storm. Among those communities, property damages in Garden City totaled \$5 million; the damages in North Myrtle Beach were \$2.5 million; but the damages along Myrtle Beach totaled only \$400,000. “The main difference among these three towns was that Myrtle Beach had just completed a nourishment project, and their shore was 50 feet wider than the other beaches,” Kana said.

Kana explains that the beach is the linchpin for storm protection and uses the analogy of a house to paint a clear picture of the importance of a wide, healthy beach during a hurricane. “The profile of the beach – including the sandy part (where you put your beach towel) and the area where you wade into the surf – is like the basement of a house,” Kana said. “Without the basement as a foundation, the whole house would come crumbling down.”

Just how wide must a beach be to provide adequate storm protection? There is no magic number, but Kana says hurricanes such as Hugo can cause the beach to erode 80-100 feet before it has a chance to

recover naturally after the storm. The average beach restoration project these days widens a beach by about 100 feet. Some communities liken beach nourishment to insurance. "It's better to have a wide beach going into the storm season so it absorbs the wave damage instead of those waves damaging the valuable properties behind it," Kana says.

For more information about the storm protection benefits of your beach, visit www.asbpa.org.

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ABOUT ASBPA

Founded in 1926, the American Shore and Beach Preservation Association (ASBPA) represents the scientific, technical and political interests along the coast in an effort to shape national research and policy concerning shore and beach management and restoration. ASBPA strives to engage in a factual debate on coastal issues and economics that will foster sound, far-sighted and economical development and preservation of our beaches; thereby aiding in placing their beliefs within the reach of the largest possible number of people in accordance with the ideals of a democratic nation. For additional information about ASBPA, please visit www.asbpa.org.