

Beaches and the Federal Government: "Pork Barrel" or "Piggy Bank" Spending?

Many children know the meaning and value of a piggy bank. It's the place to put money that can be used for a "rainy" day.

Many adults understand the meaning of "pork barrel" projects. These projects are slipped into Congressional spending bills to benefit purely local interests (i.e., funding for a senior center for a rural town or a museum to showcase a local issue).

I maintain that beach projects are "piggy bank" spending efforts by the federal government. By analogy, the beach is the place (bank) to put sand (money) to reduce damages when a storm (rainy day) comes.

Strong, wide beaches benefit all of us. State, local, and federal governments share the costs for maintaining these resources. Moreover, every beach that receives federal funds must have public access – for everyone. They are truly national treasures, just like our national parks.

When disasters strike across our country, federal funds are often tapped to help with the recovery efforts. With this in mind, some of the most fiscally-conservative members of Congress have praised the wise investment of federal funds in shore protection. They understand that efforts to reduce the need for federal emergency recovery funds will benefit all U.S. taxpayers.

We know that beach nourishment is a proactive way of decreasing recovery costs. For example, on March 7, 1962 the infamous "Ash Wednesday" northeaster struck the Middle Atlantic coast. Total structural loss was estimated at over \$234 million (1962 dollars) on 1800 homes and thousands more were severely damaged. The federal government paid for damage repairs.

In contrast, on September 18, 2003 Hurricane ISABEL struck the Hampton Roads region. A wide beach was in place as a result of the US Army Corps of Engineers project. The damages **prevented** were estimated at over \$105 million (2003 dollars) for the Virginia Beach and Sandbridge oceanfront areas as reported in USA Today (Nov 9, 2003). Clearly, having this beach project in place benefited the federal taxpayer by decreasing recovery costs.

The recent tragedy in New Orleans that resulted from Hurricane KATRINA is still under investigation. Many “reasons” are bandied about that cover all science/engineering, economic, environmental, social/political/institutional, and aesthetic factors that caused the disaster. But the clear fact so far is that over \$100 billion in federal disaster funding will be needed to even partially recover. Back when the flood protection levees were authorized and constructed, and then again when maintenance and improvement funding was requested, some labeled these Corps of Engineers spending requests as “pork-barrel” efforts by the Louisiana Congressional delegation. Those same critics were silenced when the value of these levees became apparent to the rest of the country.

Again, beach nourishment projects are “piggy-bank” type of projects. Initial construction costs and maintenance expenses over time are invested for the beach to be ready when the “rainy days” come and disaster strikes the coast. To do otherwise is like another old adage: “penny wise and pound foolish.”

The next time you hear claims about “pork barrel” spending by the Corps of Engineers for beach nourishment, remember the value of your piggy bank. Wide, nourished beaches significantly reduce the need for disaster funding and protect the interests of federal taxpayers. Teaching your children to save money in a piggy bank for a rainy day in the future is also a good idea.

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Nov 8, 2006