

Why N.J. beaches are in 'better shape than ever' despite rapid fire nor'easters

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By Cassidy Grom, cgrom@njadvancemedia.com,
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Despite getting hit by seven rapid-fire nor'easters this year, New Jersey beaches are in better shape than ever, and ready for tourist and hurricane season, government experts said Wednesday.

The storms were mostly mild but had a cumulative impact on the Shore, pulling down dunes that protect towns and dragging sand into the ocean, said Stewart Farrell, the executive director of the Coastal Research Center at Stockton University.

However, efforts to widen the beaches put much of the state in a secure position for the upcoming hurricane season, said David Rosenblatt, the assistant commissioner for construction and engineering at the state Department of Environmental Protection.

"Each (nor'easter) took a bite and because they were a week apart, there was no natural recovery between storms," Farrell said at a press conference in Atlantic City.

A nor'easter can damage a beach in six hours, but significant natural recovery takes at least six weeks, Farrell said.

The south end of Stone Harbor was particularly hit hard this year, he said. The nor'easters stole about a third of the sand on its dunes, Farrell said, but like other shores previously assaulted by high tides, fast wind and precipitation, Stone Harbor is likely to at least partially self-mend.

Avalon and Ocean Harbor were both "filled" in 2017 -- a process by which officials vacuum excess sand from the ocean using a giant pipe, then spit it back out onto shores that need more sand, Farrell said. Although this year's storms moved 200,000 yards of sand into the water, Farrell said half of it was back above the lowest point the tide regularly reaches by May.

It is a different story than after larger storms like 2012's Hurricane Sandy, however. In 2013 Congress passed the Sandy Recovery Improvement Act, which allows the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to fund 100 percent of the restoration of any authorized New Jersey beach project directly related to damage from the storm.

Usually, the USACE builds up large dunes to create a buffer between the sea and vulnerable shore towns, often despite residents' complaints that it changes their shore's landscape for the worse.

"All the beaches are different, and the people that go to those beaches, swear that they have the best beach in the state, maybe even in the country," Rosenblatt said. "People are very protective of what they have."

Where the federal government replaced sand after Hurricane Sandy on the 120-plus miles of New Jersey coastline, they put about 120 cubic yards per foot back on the shoreline. Normally,

natural accretion puts back 20 to 40 cubic yards, Farrell said.

The amount of sand that was moved by man and machine since Sandy could fill the Lincoln Financial Field eight times, Keith Watson, of the USACE said.

By 2015, the beaches were approximately back to where they were prior to Sandy, and are currently "in better shape than ever before," according to the Coastal Research Center. Rosenblatt added that Jersey's coastal water quality is over the standard 97 percent of the time.

It takes awhile for life-long beachgoers to adjust to the changing view of the landscape or hiking up a dune on their way to the water, Rosenblatt said. Yet, eventually, New Jersey will have another Sandy-like hurricane that might hit parts of the state that went previously unscathed, and "the proof will come" that the protective dunes and more extended beaches are good for the area.

Now that many of the post-Sandy recovery efforts are completed, Rosenblatt said officials intend to address repetitive flooding in back bay communities. They also want to step away from spot-fixing shores, and will instead work on resilience planning for whole regions.

*Cassidy Grom may be reached at cgrom@njadvancemedia.com
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