



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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INTERIOR DEPARTMENT REPORTS TO CONGRESS ON RECOMMENDED CHANGES,
ADDITIONS TO COASTAL BARRIER RESOURCES SYSTEM

The Department of the Interior today announced the availability of the final supplemental environmental impact statement and the report containing recommendations to Congress concerning additions, deletions, and other changes for the Coastal Barrier Resources System on the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico coasts. The report will become final upon formal transmittal to Congress.

The Interior Department's report is advisory. There will be no changes in the existing system unless Congress takes action.

The report and recommendations will culminate 6 years of effort in response to Congressional mandates contained in the 1982 Coastal Barrier Resources Act. When passed, the act established a system of 186 undeveloped coastal barrier units comprising 452,839 acres along 667 miles of Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico shoreline. The law requires the Interior Department to study and recommend additions, deletions, or modifications to the system and to consider other alternatives to foster conservation of coastal resources.

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The purpose of the 1982 act is to discourage development of the coastal barrier units by prohibiting most new Federal expenditures and financial assistance within the system. This affects Federal activities such as issuance of Federal flood insurance, road and channel construction, and utility subsidies. State, local, and private financial assistance and expenditures within the system are not affected by the act.

The recommendations contained in the report encourage congressional action to modify the Coastal Barrier Resources system by:

- o Adding 1,243,678 acres of undeveloped, unprotected coastal barriers consisting of mostly wetlands and about 140,000 acres of coastal uplands on fastlands along the Atlantic and Gulf coastlines not previously considered by Congress;
- o Adding all aquatic habitats associated with both existing and recommended units of the system. While the act defined undeveloped coastal barriers as including adjacent wetlands and estuaries, the originally designated units focused more on the land portions where Federal flood insurance would be precluded.
- o Including undeveloped, unprotected coastal barriers of the Florida Keys, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands in the system. Recommended additions in the Florida Keys do not include Highway 1 for safety reasons.

- o Adjusting the recommended boundaries of several units to exclude major shipping channels and all existing Federal navigation channels by reference so that dredging can be continued.
- o Including so-called secondary barriers found in large, well-defined bays (such as Narragansett Bay and Chesapeake Bay) or in lagoons on the mainland side of coastal barriers. These secondary barriers are generally smaller than oceanside barriers and are maintained by wind-generated waves. The barriers and their associated aquatic habitat are important for protecting fish and wildlife habitat and buffering the mainland during major storms.
- o Excluding "otherwise protected," Coast Guard, and military lands but adding them at such time they are made available for development inconsistent with the purposes of the act.

Eighteen states along the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico coasts are fronted by nearly 400 coastal barriers. These coastal areas of shifting sand, shell, and gravel range from small, isolated shoals to extensive chains of islands stretching for hundreds of miles.

The instability of coastal barriers and their susceptibility to storm damage make development hazardous and costly to subsidize through Federal flood insurance and other Federal programs. Of the approximately 453,000 acres initially included in the system, over 100,000 acres are fastland.

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The coastal barriers along the Atlantic and Gulf coastlines protect wetlands which are the spawning and nursery areas for an estimated 90 percent of the fin- and shellfish harvested each year in the United States. Their beaches offer nesting habitat for endangered sea turtles and numerous species of shorebirds. They also offer an exceptional variety of recreational opportunities.

Since the mid 1950's, however, about 400,000 acres of coastal wetlands have been lost, with the current annual loss estimated at 18,000 acres. Although comprising only 16 percent of the Nation's land area, the coastal zone contains approximately 62 percent of the Nation's population, according to the Census Bureau.

The Coastal Barriers Study Group, staffed by professionals from the National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Geological Survey, developed the report and legislative environmental impact statement.

In March 1985, the study group released an initial inventory and a summary report including the criteria it used for determining suitable undeveloped areas. In 1987, a draft report, maps, and the Assistant Secretary's proposed recommendations for additions, deletions, and other modifications to the system were released for comment. In February 1988, a draft supplemental legislative environmental impact statement concerning the proposed recommendation was issued.

Through the entire process, interested individuals were invited to comment on the proposals and the study group worked closely with representatives of the various coastal states to assure their views were given full consideration.

All individuals who provided written comments to the Study Group on the Draft Report and Recommendations or Legislative Environmental Impact Statement have been mailed appropriate volumes of the report. Those desiring additional information should contact the Coastal Barriers Study Coordinator, Frank McGilvrey, Room 403 Hamilton Building, Department of the Interior, Washington, DC 20240, or call (202) 343-1095.

A formal notice of availability will be printed in the Federal Register on December 16, 1988.