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Breaches from Sandy to be filled in

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Photo credit: Doug Kuntz | An aerial shot of Fire Island and a look at the destruction caused by superstorm Sandy. (Oct. 31, 2012)

Videos

Two breaches that cut through parts of Fire Island last week during superstorm Sandy will be filled in, and planning for the repair work could begin next week, the Army Corps of Engineers confirmed Tuesday.

Two barge operators already in the New York area will be diverted to fill in the breaches near Smith Point County Park and Cupsogue

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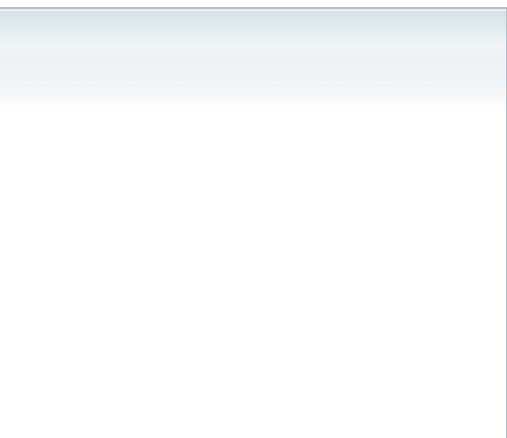Shelters, other help

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County Park in Suffolk County, corps spokesman Chris Gardner said.

The news comes as a nor'easter is expected to batter the region beginning Wednesday with high winds and tides, putting an already beaten up South Shore at risk. Fire Island typically acts as a buffer to ocean waves, but the breaches allow those waters to rush into Great South Bay, swamping some of the lower elevation communities.

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"Closing the Fire Island breaches is important to protect so many people's homes, to preserve the geography of the island and to provide flood protection for tens of thousands of vulnerable homeowners on the southern shore," Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) said in a statement announcing the corps' decision.

Discussions are ongoing with the National Park Service about what do about a third breach in the wilderness area of Fire Island National Seashore, Gardner said.

The Army corps has committed to pay for 65 percent of the project costs, with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation covering the remaining 35 percent.

The corps has $4 million to fund the project and the state has committed money as well, Gardner said.

It's unclear how long the work will take, but it has been fast-tracked thanks to a Breach Contingency Plan established in the mid-1990s between New York and the federal government.

"We're realistically talking weeks, not months, to get these closed up," Gardner said.

Cost increases The cost of closing breaches in the South Shore barrier islands grows each day they remain open.

That's what drove a push to quickly repair the gashes created by Sandy's high winds and punishing storm tides.

With winter nearing, the threat of nor'easters to the already bruised coast makes action all the more imperative, according to elected leaders.

"We are entering into some of the roughest weather of the season," said Assemb. Fred Thiele Jr. (I-Sag Harbor). "Acting quickly will save a lot of taxpayer dollars down the line."

A costly failure to quickly close a breach at Westhampton 20 years ago led to a multimillion-dollar expenditure and created an uproar that led the federal and state governments to create a Breach

Map: LIPA outages

Contingency Plan in 1995 that is supposed to guide response to storms such as Sandy.

That plan has now been activated, with DEC Commissioner Joe Martens late last week sending a letter of request for aid to the Army corps that cited "enormous damages to Long Island's barrier beaches."

Anthony Ciorra, a program manager for the corps' New York District, said that even before the letter was received, his agency and DEC officials were working together to survey the ravaged coast and implement the breach plan.

"We want to move as quickly as possible, as does our nonfederal partner, the State of New York," Ciorra said.

When storm forces breach a barrier island, the opening that's created allows ocean and bay waters to mingle during normal tide cycles. Breaches can become permanent inlets and are more serious than washovers, which are gone once storm tides pass.

Damaged in the early '90s The last time the barrier islands were so badly damaged was in the early 1990s. Hurricane Bob and the Halloween nor'easter struck in 1991. Then came a monster nor'easter in December 1992 and another in March of the following year.

The 1992 storm caused two breaches east of Moriches Inlet near Pikes Beach, according to the Breach Contingency Plan. One was repaired within a month using material from a nearby maintenance dredging operation, according to the plan.

The second breach, at Westhampton and initially the smaller of the two new channels, was not repaired and grew. Thiele, who was then Southampton Town supervisor, said the town appealed for aid but its pleas went unanswered.

"It was way beyond our ability to handle," he said. "And we got absolutely no help from the federal government or the state government at that time."

In the breach plan, the corps estimated that this new channel was initially 200 to 300 feet wide and 2 to 5 feet deep. It took six months to award a contract to fill the breach and another five months to complete the project. By the time work began to close the breach, it was 2,500 feet wide and between 12 and 20 feet deep.

In today's dollars, that work cost $11 million, the corps said. Had the breach been addressed within two weeks of its occurrence, the corps estimated, it could have been closed at a cost of between $480,000 and $800,000.

A report issued by then Gov. Mario M. Cuomo's Coastal Erosion Task Force also followed the breach fiasco.

The task force determined that the state's policy would be to close all breaches "until enough information is available to quantitatively assess the impacts of these features." The task force went on to recommend that further studies "be undertaken to address and weigh new inlet impacts."

Effects not known yet Jay Tanski, a coastal geologist with New York Sea Grant, a joint Stony Brook University/Cornell University program, said that work on the breaches caused by Sandy has yet to be done.

Tanski helped author a study in 2001 that found that the impacts of breaches on the plant and sealife of the Great South Bay were "complex and not well understood."

While there remains uncertainty whether and how new breaches are a threat to animal and plant species in bay waters, the effects on those living on the mainland are evident: They are likely to see higher tidal ranges and potential for flooding when storms hit the coast.

In its breach plan, the Army corps states that before the 1992 channel at Westhampton was closed, it produced increased tidal and stormwater levels in Moriches Bay, "causing backbay damage to the towns of East Moriches, Remsenburg and Mastic Beach."

During the March 1993 nor'easter, residents of the mainland across from the inlet at Westhampton reported flooding two feet higher than during the storm of the winter before that had created the inlet, the corps said.

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