

SAND WARS

Shoreline erosion has officials seeking alternative sand sources — and defending what's theirs



It's easy to take the beach for granted in Florida — most residents have access in a two-hour drive or less, and roughly 77 percent of the state's population lives in coastal areas. The beach is our playground, our claim to fame, our picture-perfect postcard. And of course, we aren't the only ones who enjoy a little fun in the sun: aside from the lure of mouse ears, the beach is Florida's number-one attraction. According to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the total economic impact of beach tourism is over \$40 billion annually — healthy beaches equal a healthy economy.

Yet, the shoreline is eroding at an alarming rate, prompting politicians and environmentalists to come up with alternative sources for sand. Hurricanes, climate change and real estate development near the ocean have all affected the ebb and flow of sand and the Florida DEP estimates that over 485 miles, or approximately 59 percent of the state's beaches, are experiencing erosion. At present, about 387 of the state's 825 miles of sandy beaches have experienced "critical erosion," a level of erosion that threatens substantial development, recreational, cultural and environmental interests.

With Senator Jeff Atwater in tow, Governor Charlie Crist recently reviewed beach erosion at Richard Kreusler Memorial Park in Palm Beach. "Tourism is Florida's number-one economic engine, and many visitors come to the Sunshine State to enjoy our great weather and beaches," said Crist. "With more than a thousand miles of sandy beaches in Florida, we must make every effort to protect the structure of our natural coastline."

While it is natural for sand to wash away, the problem is that suitable offshore sand that could be dredge-worthy is also running out in parts of

Florida — basically, we're running out of sand. In turn, our prized beaches — particularly those in Miami Beach — may now resemble those of Nassau. After a decade of negotiations, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers approved the allowance of Miami Beach County to import foreign beach sand. A clause in federal law had previously prevented this, but, having proved that all domestic sources have been exhausted, the foreign material was approved.

It's a triumph for Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, whose district includes Miami Beach, and who has been a strong advocate of the cause for years. "Without the beaches, we might as well be in Nebraska," she told the *Miami Herald*. Beach nourishment is on the top of Ros-Lehtinen's agenda. The representative has hosted meetings with Army Corps Director of Civil Works Major General Don T. Riley and Assistant Secretary of the Army John Paul Woodley as well as state, county and local officials in her Washington, D.C. office to push the issue.

But not everyone's thrilled about importing sand. Environmentalists are skeptical of the species that may come along for the ride, and also consider the mix potentially harmful for existing sea turtles, coral reefs and sea grasses. Previous attempts had been made to transfer sand from elsewhere in Florida, which sparked a political controversy of my sand versus your sand. Florida Senate president Ken Pruitt told the *St. Petersburg Times*, "We will fight to the death to make sure you don't take one grain of sand," in defense of St. Lucie County, where the Army Corps of Engineers thought there was a good supply of compatible sand for Miami Beach. Headlines in the *Port St. Lucie News* accused Miami politicians of being "sand robbers" with a "plunder-and-loom mentality." Needless to say, the Corps abandoned that plan.

Broward County is considering creating sand from recycled glass bottles — sounds freakish, yes, but bear in mind that glass is technically made from sand. According to a report in the *New York Times*, over \$500,000 is being committed to testing the idea, exploring everything from the response of beachgoers to the ability of sea turtles to nest in it. But even if the glass idea proves successful, it may not be the cheapest option, which may eventually prompt Broward to also import foreign sand. Another option is to build reefs or blocks out at sea to break the waves thereby reducing erosion significantly. "We say you have to think outside the sandbox," Nikki Grossman, president of the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention & Visitors Bureau, told the *Times*. With a significant portion of the state's economy dependent on beach tourism, solutions are certainly needed — and they're needed immediately. — Jayme O'Rourke