

Constraints to Implementing Sea Level Rise Mitigation Strategies in Rural Eastern North Carolina
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The reluctance of community leaders and business owners in North Carolina's coastal counties to address sea-level rise and climate change has been widely commented on in the media and in academic publications. While there is both scientific evidence and advice available on how to address sea-level rise, the constraints that small rural communities face in implementing adaptation strategies is less often reviewed. This presentation reports findings from a community engagement project funded by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation. In 2014 our team of five cultural anthropologists conducted hour long interviews with a quota sample of 156 residents from Tyrrell, Hyde and eastern Washington County about their understanding of the changing natural environment and their suggestions for best practices for adaptation. Analysis shows that in contrast to their neighbors along the Outer Banks, local residents of the Albemarle– Pamlico Peninsula are more keenly aware of the occurrence and consequences of an encroaching ocean, higher water levels, and the threat of salt water inundation to agricultural fields and tree farms. In 2015 we followed the collection of local voices with a specific effort in cooperation with the Tyrrell County Soil and Water Conservation District. We proposed the formation of small scale, special use water management districts to individual local property owners. We went door to door to communicate about the benefits of local water management efforts and the tax levy amount specific to the individual property. We learned that despite gaining approval from approximately two thirds of affected households, the likelihood of participation and cooperation in self-administered water management districts is low. Economic resources in rural counties are scarce and interest in new adaptation measures is not easy to establish. The widespread distrust in shared activities across divisions between ethnic groups, generations, socioeconomic classes, and church communities is difficult to overcome despite the low number of total residents in Tyrrell County. This presentation reviews the cultural and structural constraints to establishing sea-level rise mitigation in small rural communities and suggests long-term strategies for engagement and bridge building between community groups.