

Adaptation Planning in the Outer Banks: Overcoming Barriers in a Multiple Decision Maker Environment

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North Carolina's Outer Banks are frequently cited in case studies as a region with a need for increased storm surge and sea level rise resilience – to protect local economies and the environment, as well for public safety. The barrier islands' mix of oceanfront and sound side habitats and settlements – coupled with a tourism-based economy and remote location – make vulnerability real, which may lead outsiders to wonder why local residents remain. But dig deeper, and a complex picture of resilience emerges in which tourists are mingled with residents whose family histories in the Outer Banks go back centuries. The result is that seemingly simple decisions to adapt to sea level rise and climate change are complicated by numerous barriers to implementation. One notable barrier is the need to have multiple decision-makers involved in the process of developing and implementing adaptation actions. One Outer Banks municipality, the Town of Nags Head, has partnered with North Carolina Sea Grant and several other institutions to increase municipal resilience to sea level rise over the next 10–30 years. This effort is proceeding in parallel to the FOCUS Nags Head process, which will allow the Town to expand its land use plan into a full comprehensive plan and develop a Unified Development Ordinance that simplifies the Town Code. North Carolina Sea Grant used the Vulnerability, Consequences, and Adaptation Planning Scenario (VCAPS) process of participatory mapping and facilitated diagramming to assist decision-makers in identifying adaptation options to support further needs-driven vulnerability mapping of public infrastructure and legal analysis of barriers to adaptation. While the Town of Nags Head strongly supports continuing to investigate options to plan for sea level rise adaptation, interview and VCAPS workshop results indicate that for many sea level and climate change issues the Town of Nags Head is not the sole decision-maker. For example, in South Nags Head, decisions by the Cape Hatteras National Seashore may impact drainage inside Town limits. Furthermore, the North Carolina Department of Transportation has jurisdiction over many of the roads and ditches inside Town boundaries, and Dare County coordinates hazard planning and evacuation. This decision landscape is proving to be quite complex, but Nags Head has a history as an early adopter on beach renourishment strategies. Therefore, a successful sea level rise planning process leading to implementable actions may set a precedent for other North Carolina coastal communities. This presentation will discuss Nags Head's efforts to plan for sea level rise, as well as the Town's strategy to engage with its federal, state, and county partners to develop adaptation actions that will increase the Town's resilience.