

The Importance of the U.S. Coast: Coastal Benefits and Risks

For millions of Americans, the beach has a special allure. We seek it out for its beauty, for the sound of ocean waves crashing on the shore, and for its peacefulness. Coastal communities foster economic productivity, house millions of Americans, and sustain some of America's most treasured natural wonders. However, as fierce storms such as Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy have demonstrated, America's coasts are vulnerable. Distinct measures must be made to ensure that the vitality of America's coastal communities is maintained.

Population Density at the Coast

Out of the 313 million people who called the U.S. home in 2010, 39%, or 123.3 million people live in counties directly along the U.S. Coastline. Coastal population growth, which has substantially outpaced the national average by as much as 89 persons per-square-mile throughout the last 40 years, is not expected to slow down.

The Coastal Economy

The coastal economy is one of the most significant contributors to the U.S. gross domestic product (GDP). In 2011, 45% or \$6.6 trillion of America's GDP was generated in Coastal Shoreline Counties. Total coastal wage payouts in 2011 topped \$2.8 trillion from the roughly 51 million American jobs that came about either directly or indirectly from coastal businesses.

Industry Along the Coast

Ports: The U.S. Seaport System, consisting of 360 ports located on all U.S. coasts, is responsible for receiving, processing, and shipping over two billion tons of cargo annually. By 2020, the coastal port system, which currently supports 13 million American jobs and \$650 billion in personal income, is poised to handle almost double the amount of all cargo shipped in 2001.

Energy: The U.S. energy industry is expected to increase its dependency on the coast as domestic energy demand continues to rise. Currently 56% of all energy production comes from coastal states, with more than 25% of crude oil production originating in coastal waters.

Tourism: Tourism is the nation's third largest contributor to annual GDP, with the coast being the top rated tourist destination among domestic and international travelers. It is estimated that coastal states annually receive roughly 85% of all tourist related revenues in the U.S. In fact, in 1998 beach tourism contributed \$225 billion dollars (in 2012 dollars) to the national economy.

Coastal Risks

Pending sea level rise in combination with normal coastal erosion rates exposes Coastal Shoreline Counties to an increasingly elevated risk of flooding and storm damages. Today, as more valuable properties and businesses reside on U.S. coastlines, the costs of disaster relief following a hurricane or flood (or both) will continue to grow.

Risk Reduction

One of the most effective ways to protect coastal areas from flooding and other storm damage is to employ coastal science and engineering through the longstanding federal program designed to reduce coastal storm damage. This program, implemented by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and partnering with state and local governments, relies primarily on the periodic nourishment of sandy shorelines and the restoration of wetlands. The effectiveness of these restoration projects has been demonstrated numerous times over several decades, most recently in the wake of Superstorm Sandy.