

Report: Fire Island breach caused by Sandy stabilizing

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The Fire Island breach that cut through the barrier island during superstorm Sandy appears to be relatively stable, has improved nearby water quality and is not putting South Shore communities at risk, according to a report released by Stony Brook University researchers.

The 2012 storm battered Fire Island, cutting inlets in three places. Two of the breaches were closed immediately, but one near Old Inlet in the Fire Island National Seashore wilderness area was left open and monitored.

"At this point the inlet has survived winter storms and summer doldrums -- neither getting so large as to irrevocably change the character of Great South Bay nor filling with sand and closing on its own," wrote professor Charles Flagg of the School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences research in the report distributed to federal, state and local officials Thursday.

The shape and size of the breach has changed over time, but in the past nine months, the amount of water moving in and out has remained fairly stable. About 8 percent of the water flowing in and out of Great South Bay is coming from the inlet, Flagg said.

State officials concur. "At the present time, the breach is stable, and is not enlarging or closing," Department of Environmental Conservation spokesman Pete Constantakes said in a statement.

The U.S. Geological Survey is also monitoring the breach, calculating the speed of the water moving in and out of the opening. "As the breach cross-section has become larger, we are seeing more water transported through the breach," said Chris Schubert, a USGS supervisory hydrologist at the agency's Water Science Center in Coram.

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Water quality around Bellport Bay east to Patchogue has also improved. When brown tide struck the bay this summer, the area near the inlet was impacted but not as severely. Fluke, striped bass and bluefish were plentiful. Clam populations also appeared to rebound, said Carl LoBue, a marine scientist with The Nature Conservancy of Long Island. "It seems to be really positive

impacts, but kind of isolated to the east part of the Bay," he said.

After Sandy, the region was battered by seven major storms and flooding along South Shore communities became a sort of new normal. Scientists said higher-than-normal water levels stretching from Maryland to Massachusetts were to blame, not the breach.

But Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone, Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and other local politicians called for its closure. The DEC soon asked U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to begin the paperwork and procedures to do so, but did not request actual work be done.

As it stands, should the breach appear to pose a danger, closure work would not be able to happen immediately. A Fire Island National Seashore spokeswoman said an environmental-impact statement must be done, but requests for Sandy aid funding have been turned down.

"At this point we don't have funding for an environmental assessment for the breach," spokeswoman Paula Valentine said.

Neither Seashore or Suffolk County officials responded to questions about how long the assessment would take, its cost or other specifics.

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