

New state law on sea level rise takes effect

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CURRITUCK — A new state law took effect this week requiring the Coastal Resources Commission to re-examine predictions on sea level rise that coastal counties say could have cost North Carolina's east coast millions of dollars.

Gov. Bev Perdue didn't sign the bill, but also didn't veto it, as some environmentalists had urged. As a result, the bill becomes law and the CRC will have to take a second look at a forecast made in 2010 that predicted a 39-inch rise in sea level over the next 88 years.

The law also prevents the state from making any new policy based on sea level predictions until 2016. The CRC's new study is due in March 2015.

NC-20, a nonprofit group that represents 20 coastal counties, claims the CRC's 2010 projection was based on "flawed science" and would have "incalculable" negative impacts on construction and insurance costs.

At a NC-20-sponsored symposium in Barco last week, Tom Thompson, the group's chairman, said the region may have been forced to spend millions of dollars to elevate roads, septic systems and homes if the state accepted the CRC's original forecast. Already, roads raised too far above the natural grade have become "dams" that cause flooding in the low-lying east, he said.

Speakers at the symposium hailed the bill requiring the CRC to re-examine the sea-level prediction as a major victory for NC-20's member counties that include Currituck, Camden, Pasquotank and Perquimans.

They said the original forecast was based on "inaccurate science" that assumed global warming would cause a sudden rise in sea level in coming years.

Two of the bill's sponsors questioned scientists' motives in predicting such a dramatic change.

State Rep. Pat McElraft, R-Carteret, charged that the doomsday predictions are based on the belief that residents on the East Coast should retreat inland. She said 400 years from now, residents of coastal counties may have to relocate, but she wasn't ready to make that move in her lifetime.

"These are our homes and businesses, and we are going to do what we can" to protect them, McElraft said.

She questioned if scientists can accurately predict so far into the future.

State Rep. Bill Cook, R-Beaufort, called for a more objective study that examines conflicting viewpoints about sea-level rise.

“Science has become a political football used by some people to further their own ends,” Cook said.

One scientist siding with NC-20 questioned the science panel’s methods in predicting sea level rise.

Dave Burton, member of the N.C. Sea Level Rise Impact Study Advisory Committee, said tide gauges across the globe measure sea-level rise and the readings do not support the findings by the CRC science panel.

According to data recorded over decades, sea level will rise seven inches — not 39 inches as the CRC panel said — in Wilmington by 2100, Burton said. Sea level will rise more dramatically in the northeast because the land there is sinking, he said. If the trend continues, sea level will rise 16 inches in Duck in the next 88 years, he said.

Burton also challenged a belief that sea level worldwide would rise because of melting icebergs. Science has already proven that floating ice, when it melts, does not cause the water level to rise, he said.

One local resident attending the NC-20 symposium said the region needs to plan for what science already knows is happening.

“Why don’t we start with what everybody agrees on?” asked Robert McClendon, sustainable design specialist for the Coastal Studies Institute.

McClendon said Burton’s prediction of a 16-inch sea level rise in Duck over the next 88 years would have a substantial impact on construction in the region.