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# Building a Resilient Coast: Results from Focus Groups and Surveys with Maine Coastal Property Owners and Municipal Officials

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Maine Sea Grant  
and the  
University of Maine  
Cooperative Extension

# Executive *summary*

## Building a Resilient Coast Results from Focus Groups & Surveys with Maine Coastal Property Owners and Municipal Officials



UNDERSTANDING THE BARRIERS AND BENEFITS THAT MAINE COASTAL PROPERTY OWNERS AND MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS FACE IN TAKING ACTION TO PREPARE FOR IMPACTS FROM COASTAL STORMS, FLOODING AND EROSION

*Photographs courtesy of Peter Slovinsky 2011*

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SUMMER 2011

This summary provides an analysis of information gathered in 2007 and 2008 during a two-year study conducted by Maine Sea Grant and the University of Maine Cooperative Extension, and funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The results were generated from broadly distributed surveys and six focus groups attended by Maine coastal property owners, municipal officials and recreational waterfront users.

*Findings highlight the logical steps needed to build coastal communities that are more resilient to coastal storms, flooding and erosion.*

## APPROACH

Maine Sea Grant seeks to design educational outreach approaches that are informed directly by coastal property owners and municipal officials. In preparation for this study, Maine Sea Grant worked with the Center for Research and Evaluation at the University of Maine to conduct a series of focus groups, and utilize the outcomes to guide a comprehensive survey process.

## METHODS

### ELEVEN COASTAL COMMUNITIES FROM SOUTHERN AND MIDCOAST MAINE WERE CHOSEN TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

#### 1. Casco Bay to the New Hampshire border:

Kittery, York, Wells, Kennebunk, Biddeford, Saco and Scarborough.

- ◆ Location for most of Maine's sand beaches;
- ◆ Substantial asset to the Maine economy;
- ◆ Significant development and private ownership.

#### 2. Midcoast region:

Rockland, Lincolnville, Camden and Rockport.

- ◆ Numerous bluffs;
- ◆ High risk for landslides.

**548 SURVEYS WERE SUBMITTED BY COASTAL PROPERTY OWNERS AND 55 WERE SUBMITTED BY MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS.**

## RATIONALE

TO UNCOVER THE BARRIERS AND BENEFITS THAT COASTAL PROPERTY OWNERS AND MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS FACE IN TAKING ACTION TO PREPARE FOR IMPACTS FROM COASTAL STORMS, FLOODING, AND EROSION.



*Photographs courtesy of Holli Andrews 2011*

*"During the (Patriot's Day) Storm we had a lot of sand wash over the dune and down the road... I shoveled that sand from the road to build the height of the dune."*

Dee Brown  
Coastal Property Owner

*"In our own interests, we hired an engineer to study our soils... That resulted in the advice that, while it might not happen in our lifetime, there was a potential danger. We decided to have a major reconstruction of our banking."*

Sam Collins,  
Coastal Property Owner

## FINDINGS Results from the study produced the following themes.

### COASTAL PROPERTY OWNERS

**KNOWLEDGE THEME: COASTAL PROPERTY OWNERS WILL REBUILD AND NEED ACCURATE INFORMATION TO MAKE DECISIONS.** Many coastal property owners have owned their properties for decades or even generations and hope to pass the property on to family. Faced with significant damage, many would plan to rebuild. However, they report lacking information critical to their decision-making (impacts of storms, flooding and erosion; the effectiveness of strategies to reduce the severity of these impacts; and related coastal regulations).

**ACTION THEME: COASTAL PROPERTY OWNERS WANT TO TAKE ACTION, BUT DON'T KNOW WHICH STRATEGIES ARE MOST EFFECTIVE.** Many coastal property owners believe they need to take action to prepare for the effects of storms, flooding and erosion — and that *soft alternatives* (restoring the dune, maintaining a natural vegetative buffer, etc.) are more effective than hard alternatives (reconstructing a seawall, stabilizing with rip-rap, etc.). However, most property owners still don't know how to determine the best strategy for their specific needs.

**BARRIERS TO ACTION THEME: COASTAL PROPERTY OWNERS WANT TO TAKE ACTION, BUT MOVING BACK AND MOVING UP ARE TOO EXPENSIVE.** Many coastal property owners believe that storms, flooding and erosion are having an impact on their properties, and that these impacts will continue in the future. They would like to do something to reduce the severity of these impacts, but the obvious solutions (move structure back on the property or elevate it) are too expensive.

**MOTIVATIONS FOR ACTION THEME: COASTAL PROPERTY OWNERS ARE MOTIVATED BY GRANTS, PEERS AND THEIR TOWN.** Grants, actions taken by peers and leadership from the Town are most motivating to coastal property owners considering what action to take.

**CONFLICT WITH GOVERNMENT THEME: COASTAL PROPERTY OWNERS SEE GOVERNMENT AS A BARRIER.** Many coastal property owners see government (primarily federal and state) as a barrier to protecting their properties and infringing on private property rights.

**SOURCES OF INFORMATION THEME: COASTAL PROPERTY OWNERS OFTEN USE TRADITIONAL RESOURCES FOR INFORMATION.** Coastal property owners prefer to receive information from newspapers, television, internet, property owner groups and realtors.



Photograph by Anna Schechter 2009

### MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS

**KNOWLEDGE THEME: MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS ARE READY TO ACT, BUT LACK INFORMATION.** Municipal officials believe it is their responsibility to take action, but feel they lack the resources and knowledge needed, such as erosion mitigation strategies, emergency management and mitigation planning strategies.

**BARRIERS AND MOTIVATION THEME: MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS LACK TIME, RESOURCES, AND MANDATE TO TAKE ACTION.** Municipal officials are very busy, have limited financial resources, and their leaders do not communicate a sense of urgency to take action.

**SOURCES OF INFORMATION THEME: MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS OFTEN USE TRADITIONAL RESOURCES FOR INFORMATION.** Municipal officials prefer to receive information from newspaper and television primarily, with technical journals, government documents and agency websites as secondary sources. Their preferred distribution method is direct mail.

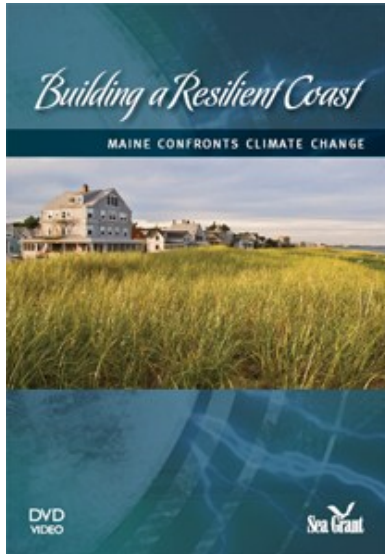
### BOTH GROUPS

**ACTION THEME: ALL AGREE, GOVERNMENT ACTION IS NEEDED, BUT DISAGREE ON TYPE OF ACTION.** Municipal officials and coastal property owners agree that there is a need for improved government action in response to coastal storms, but disagree as to the right solutions.

## IN RESPONSE

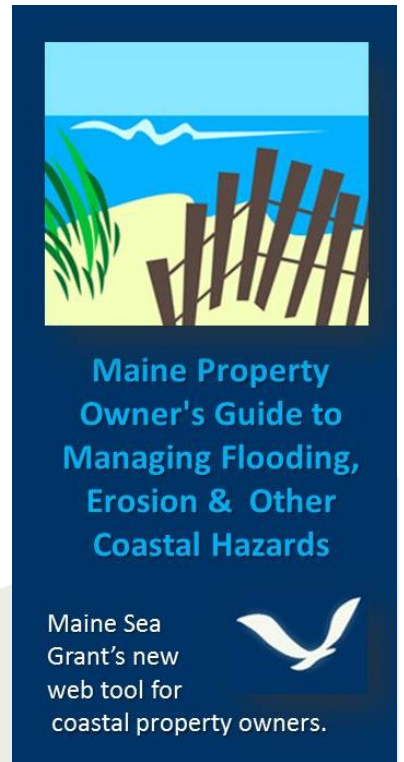
[www.seagrant.umaine.edu/coastal-hazards-guide](http://www.seagrant.umaine.edu/coastal-hazards-guide)

**WEBSITE** Maine Sea Grant and University of Maine Cooperative Extension have teamed up with the Maine State Planning Office, Maine Geological Survey, and Maine Department of Environmental Protection to design and launch a website for coastal property owners and municipal officials as a guide for managing the effects from coastal hazards associated with storms, flooding and erosion.



**VIDEO** Working in partnership, Maine and Oregon Sea Grant Programs created the video, *Building a Resilient Coast*. The program's five brief segments allow coastal property owners and municipalities to hear and see what their neighbors, municipal officials and climate experts have to say about storm events, coastal flooding and erosion; what it means for them, and what they can do about it. The video is available online or on DVD through Maine Sea Grant.

**OUTREACH** Maine Sea Grant and the University of Maine Cooperative Extension continue to coordinate with federal, state and local government agencies and organizations to provide education, communication and resources to Maine people.



*Partners in the final steps of the project include Maine Geological Survey, University of Maine Cooperative Extension, Climate Change Institute, Maine Coastal Program, and the Center for Research and Evaluation.*



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