Beaches are disappearing in Southern California as El Niño bears down

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Beachfront homeowners and beachcombers are watching the sand vanish into the ocean as torrid waves strike the California coast

Southern Californians have long viewed the disappearance of their prized beaches as an abstract problem for future generations to solve. Not anymore. Giant swells have pounded the coast in recent weeks, laying bare the immediate vulnerability of the state's oceanfront.

Powerful swells this year have swallowed beaches and damaged homes in parts of Southern California (photo by New York Times)

In Long Beach, residents were forced to flee as the Pacific Ocean battered their homes this month. Up the coast, a gaping sinkhole prompted evacuations in Malibu outside of the actor Nicolas Cage's mansion. In Orange County, the relentless waves cut off a key rail line and left a section of a popular beach parking lot crumbled like a smashed pack of Oreos. Multimillion-dollar houses washed into the sea.

Southern California residents are once again facing the prospect of relentless waves this weekend as a distant hurricane off the coast of Mexico could wreak havoc up the Pacific Coast.

As damaging as storms have already been this year, residents and local leaders are girding themselves for far worse in the months ahead, driven by what experts warn could be the strongest, wettest El Niño ever recorded. “We’re in the dark humor stage of mourning,” said Chris Rogers, as he welcomed visitors to his now-uninhabitable house on a narrow, gated road between a railroad track and what was once a beach in Dana Point, Calif.

These days, living on the California coast means negotiating with impermanence. Homes atop cliffs or along beaches could slip away. Those in the hills could burn like the ones in Malibu and the Pacific Palisades did two winters ago. While quite a few families have left, many, like Mr. Rogers, feel they can find a way to stay.

Chris Rogers hopes to reinforce his uninhabitable home, which sits on a narrow road between a railroad track and what was once a beach in Dana Point (NY Times)

This week, Gov. Gavin Newsom declared a statewide El Niño emergency aimed at preparing California for the months ahead. State leaders have urged residents not to underestimate the potential this winter for extremely dangerous conditions along the coast.

For many, this summer's damage is prompting a reckoning. Residents are fighting to protect their seafront property and calling for emergency armoring of the shore, typically by putting up walls of big boulders known as riprap or reinforcing sand berms. But such emergency measures could also hasten the beach's deterioration, experts say. The California Coastal Commission and other regulatory agencies have limited drastic moves that might buy only a few extra months or years of protection.

Such efforts delay the inevitable, experts say. Without human development, beaches evolved with the sand ebbing and flowing, and the Coastal Commission wants to allow for more of that natural change. That might involve moving parking lots and roadways farther inland and replacing sidewalks with paths through sand dunes and native plants.

Erosion near private property is a far more difficult problem to resolve. In Mr. Rogers's home, the windows that had a view of the Pacific Ocean are now tilted into the sand, which has overtaken the living room. As he inspected the damage recently, he avoided the foam lapping at the flip flops on his feet and was careful not to walk under the precarious eaves of his house, which was built in 1953.

"We would have zero of this conversation if we had sand out there," Mr. Rogers, 51, said, referring to a bigger ocean barrier. "Now, you need to put a tourniquet on the wound."

Some Southern Californians have begun pondering life with a transformed coastline.

A damaged parking lot and boardwalk at Aliso Beach in Laguna Beach (NY Times)

Kai Bond, the longtime chief of marine safety for Laguna Beach, recently stood in the damaged parking lot of Aliso Beach, a prime attraction in the quintessential Southern California beach town. Warm water and consistent big swells since June had begun to wash away the sand, he said. The damage was then compounded by Hurricane Marie over Labor Day weekend, leaving jagged boulders that formed a kind of cliff, just below fire rings that have played host to generations of teenage beach bonfires. The long-hidden ruins of a pier were visible under the waves.

“It’s just, the brunt of it,” Mr. Bond said, his voice trailing off.

The downtown of Laguna Beach lies at the mouth of a canyon, and many homes are perched on winding streets high above the beach. Dave Kiff, the city manager, said local officials were preparing not just for big waves, but also catastrophic flooding, landslides and even wildfires — all of which could be made worse by El Niño. “We worry about all of that,” Mr. Kiff said.

Gary Griggs, a professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, one of the state’s top experts on the coast, said that California’s shoreline was developed and hardened during a period of relative calm, from the 1940s to the 1970s, when beaches here were stable and wide. Since then, the California coast’s median high tide line — which is where public property officially begins — has moved up only by the width of nickels. But, he said, extreme weather, including

recent hurricanes in the Pacific, has amplified the effect of sea level rise, sending bigger waves during high tides.

It has been enough to squeeze many public beaches almost out of existence. While sea-level rise will be the big problem later in the century, the more immediate challenge will be “these short-term, extreme events, which California has experienced a number of times,” Dr. Griggs said.

The only permanent answer, such experts say, is to get out of the way. But beachfront property owners, as well as some local officials, blame government — not climate change or sea level rise — for their woes.

Katrina Foley, an Orange County supervisor who represents the area, said that she learned just a few years ago that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the county had jointly agreed to replenish sand on surrounding beaches when Dana Point Harbor was first dredged in the 1960s. That never happened.

As Orange County beaches have narrowed, she explains, she has been learning everything she can about sand: Where the county might be able to find extra, how it might be moved to beaches that need it and where it will drift once it has been placed on the beach. She says she believes it would be misguided to give up on replenishing the sand simply because of inevitable sea rise. Pst dredging of harbors and coastal construction has also been to blame for the vulnerability of beaches today, and that it was worth trying to reverse those impacts, she argues. “The beaches wouldn’t be at this point if it weren’t for human intervention,” she says.

Elsewhere in Orange County, Ms. Foley walked to a bluff overlooking the beaches of San Clemente. A rail line wound its way along the coast and waves splashed up to the tracks over a hillside of black, craggy riprap.

Image

In Orange County, home to some of the most popular coastal destinations in the U.S., the relentless waves have cut off a key rail line

The stretch is one of the nation's most-used rail corridors, but service has been plagued by repeated interruptions over the past several years. Over the course of a century, it was almost never closed until September 2021, according to the Orange County Transportation Authority. Then the closures, seven in all, started piling up as the bluffs and sand beneath the tracks kept slipping toward the ocean.

Moving the rail line farther inland would be a difficult undertaking that would almost certainly require eminent domain and face opposition from neighbors.

Ms. Foley worked with Representative Mike Levin, Democrat of California, to secure federal funding to place sand at "hot spots" in the area, which would also eventually migrate to other parts of the coast that are also in need. But the Coastal Commission and other federal and state agencies have not granted permits, she says.

Officials with the commission said that they had sought to balance long-term coastal stewardship against the emergencies that have become a more frequent occurrence. The agency approved all of the emergency permits for beach armoring along Mr. Rogers's street in Dana Point, allowing 17 homeowners to place riprap between their structures and the ocean. But they must remove it after 120 days.

Agency officials said they have to consider the long-term health of the coastline. “We don’t want to be in this reactive place every time there’s a storm,” said Kelsey Ducklow, coastal resilience coordinator with the California Coastal Commission. “These events are showing us that we really need to be working now, and we unfortunately need to make some of these hard decisions now to set us up for a better future.”