



**Testimony for Water Resources and Environment of the Committee on
Transportation and Infrastructure Sub-Committee hearing:
“Proposals for a Water Resources Development Act of 2024: Stakeholder
Priorities”**

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2167 Rayburn House Office Building

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Chairman Rouzer and Ranking Member Napolitano, it is an honor and a privilege to testify before this distinguished subcommittee today to discuss the Town of Surf City’s federal coastal storm damage reduction project. My name is Teresa Batts and I am the mayor of Surf City, North Carolina.

Passing the Water Resources Development Act, or WRDA as it is commonly referred to, on a biannual basis has provided the nation’s coastal engineering community with the reliability and certainty that it needs to advance critical resilience projects like the one at Surf City. The Town of Surf City supports the development of WRDA 2024 and we would like to acknowledge the tremendous bipartisan track record of this important infrastructure bill. Thank you for your leadership and commitment to this authorizing process.

I would also like to acknowledge Chairman Rouzer, an ardent champion for U.S. coastal resilience and for North Carolina beach communities. Congressman Rouzer, thank you for your support of the Town of Surf City and for highlighting our WRDA needs.

Chairman Rouzer, you have visited Surf City numerous times and I’m quite certain you remember meeting with myself and members of our Council following Hurricane Florence and

recall the damage it caused in our community. These photos give the other subcommittee members a sense of the extreme vulnerability that Surf City faces. They were taken post Florence and illustrate the consequences of not having an adequate dune structure in place. You can see the exposed infrastructure and the devastation this creates. As Chairman Rouzer mentioned last week, our federal nourishment project is long overdue.

The Town of Surf City was founded in 1949. We are located in the heart of Topsail Island, North Carolina, and serve as the economic engine for the surrounding island and inland communities. Our residents and property owners have strong ties to the coastal environment, representing commercial and recreational fisherman, a thriving aquaculture industry, as well as retail, restaurants, and other businesses, all within a vibrant, family friendly, small town environment.

I hope the committee will consider my open invitation to visit Surf City. In the meantime, I appreciate the opportunity today to highlight the desperate need for authorization of our federal project as well as the value that the coastal mission of the US Army Corps of Engineers' (Corps) provides to the nation.

Beaches and dunes are a proven form of natural infrastructure. They protect coastal communities like Surf City from flooding, ensuring that local businesses are still running after a storm, and that coastal residents can return to their homes quickly with few repairs. Economic benefits of storm protection for our roads, infrastructure, and private property are of utmost importance. Proactively investing in wide beaches and high, vegetated dunes saves the federal government money by reducing post-disaster recovery payments.

Beaches, dunes and wetlands are, simply put, wise fiscal investments. Proactively investing in coastal infrastructure will save the federal government money by reducing post-disaster recovery payments.

Storm risk management is not the only reason to invest in coastal infrastructure projects. The beach is the reason tourists visit Surf City, as well as every other beach town in the U.S. A 2022

study found that beach vacations were the most popular destinations, accounting for 66% of family trips. Remember, most U.S. beach towns are not the land of the rich and famous. We offer an affordable, working-class vacation to the American public. Tourists spend money in my town, in the hotels, restaurants, and shops because they are on a beach vacation. They will stop coming if the beach goes away.

Beaches create **jobs** too. Nationally, the ocean-based **tourism** and recreation sector employs more Americans than the entire real estate industry, as well as more people than building construction and telecommunications combined. People don't come to my town for health care or to work in a textile plant. A majority of households make between \$50,000 and \$150,000 per year, demonstrating a strong presence of middle-income residents. These are people that work in our schools, support the tourism sector, and work in construction.

For every dollar the federal government spends on beach restoration, you collect at least \$250 in beach tourist tax revenues. When this revenue is combined with the cost savings from coastal disasters and the recreational and workforce benefits that beaches provide, it is crystal clear that these projects are **excellent national investments** that increase coastal resilience.

The Town of Surf City requires authorization of our Coastal Storm Risk Management project in WRDA 2024. The initial Chief's Report that combined Surf City with North Topsail Beach was completed in 2010 and authorized in WRDA 2014. Thirteen years later, our town has yet to see construction of a federal beach project. This time span has led to increased vulnerability due to reduced protection. The Town has been, and remains, committed to this project as we feel that a Corps' beach provides us the best protection for the taxpayers dollar. Delays in the project have led to a loss of millions of federal, state, and local tax dollars due to price escalation in the dredging industry over this time frame. The Town has also invested significantly in erosion mitigation efforts during this time including a \$14 million sand truck haul project to shore up the disappearing beach.

When the Town was notified of construction funding for this project through the Disaster Recovery Act of 2019, we were immediately engaged with the Wilmington District to complete the necessary local items to advance the project. The Wilmington District and South Atlantic Division have been wonderful partners throughout this very long process. North Topsail Beach, on the other hand, withdrew from the project in 2021. This requires a new authorization for a Surf City only project in order to use the DRA 2019 funds. Currently, investigation funds that will ultimately lead to construction are awaiting approval.

Surf City has been prepared to sign a Project Partnership Agreement and see this project to construction since Day 1. The Town faithfully procured land to increase our public parking and access to the beach, we have secured over 86% of easements necessary to authorize the Corps' and its contractors to complete the work and are dedicated to obtaining 100%. Simply stated, the Town has been a great partner to the Corps' and will continue throughout the lifespan of this critical project for the Town of Surf City.

Surf City is grateful to your sub-committees and Congress for ensuring that the critical missions of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are authorized and implemented. On behalf of my fellow community leaders, thank you for WRDA22 with its many coastal provisions. We recognize the need for implementation. Improving the resilience of coastal communities will take coordination across multiple federal agencies working together with state and local authorities. Most importantly for our town, the Surf City Coastal Storm Risk Management project will provide not only the first large-scale nourishment project for our coastline, but also serve as the longer term solution to maintaining the beach that our residents and visitors both cherish and respect greatly.

In closing, we are in desperate need of **new authorization for a "Surf City only" project** to be eligible for construction, which can only happen through the WRDA process. The Town of Surf City supports timely passage of WRDA 2024 and respectfully requests the subcommittee's support to include this project. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Photos illustrating the vulnerability of the Town of Surf City, NC following Hurricane Florence

September 2018



