

Westside beaches prime candidates for erosion

✓ Beach erosion



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

U.S. Geological Survey workers Bruce Richmond and Cheryl Hapke have been monitoring Its Beach ever since a series of storms pounded it this past winter. The beach has not recovered as fast as geologists had expected it would.

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SANTA CRUZ — Expect Santa Cruz County to get a little smaller this winter.

Area geologists say the county's coastal bluffs are prime candidates for erosion because many local beaches have yet to recover from this past winter's land-lashing storms.

"The protective beaches are already gone," said Cheryl Hapke, a geologist with the U.S. Geological Survey's Monterey Bay office. She pinpointed the bluffs along West Cliff Drive as an area that could see significant erosion.

Geologists say many local beaches have rebounded just fine from last winter's storms, which moved massive amounts of sand. But some areas apparently were only spotted with sand, including areas along West Cliff Drive and Twin Lakes State Beach.

The beach area surrounding Santa Cruz harbor is one of those areas that hasn't recovered, at least not quickly, said Kristin Brown, a UC Santa Cruz student and USGS geologist.

"Someone who has lived there all their life told me they'd never seen the bedrock down by the harbor uncovered," she said. "That's really unusual."

Port Director Brian Foss agreed: "We have two problems: the beaches are losing it and the (harbor) entrance is gaining it. ... It's the wrong side of that trend."

Brown added that she's never seen Its

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Beach (Lighthouse Field State Beach) as badly eroded before a winter season as it is right now.

"You can actually see the base of the stairs losing sand," Brown said.

Hapke estimated that the beach lost about 15,000 cubic meters of sand this past winter and never got it back.

Alex Peabody, California State Parks aquatic supervisor, also has noticed significant erosion.

"You can see erosion going on right now at Twin Lakes State Beach," Peabody said. "It will be interesting to see how the beaches that have had some recovery will stand the surf and wave action since beaches really protect the coastline."

USGS geologist Bruce Richmond said the local beaches eventually will recover, and for the same reason they lost sand last winter — El Niño. The storms that battered the coast were accompanied by heavy rains, which washed a lot of sediment out of county creeks. That sediment will eventually wind up as sand.

The sand, however, does not always end up where expected.

Last year's storms created, albeit temporarily, "New Beach," located near the base of the stairs at Cowell Beach. That spot has since washed out.

"One of the things we knew coming in is that there are seasonal changes to the beaches," Richmond said. "The unexpected things were the new beach and ... the fact some beaches haven't recovered at all."