

ASBPA Newsroom: Beach News

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Beaches 101: The winter beach

FORT MYERS, FL – You've been looking forward to this day all week, and now you're finally on your way. Ahhhh....you can smell the sea air as you drive up and park your car. You walk toward the surf, and, already, you're starting to feel relaxed. As you stroll through the sand on this beautiful, chilly day, you notice the beach seems smaller than it did when you were here last summer. You're right. Welcome to the winter beach!

"In the winter most American beaches appear to erode, because winter storms create steep waves that pull the sand out into underwater sand bars," says Scott Douglass, Ph.D., a professor of Civil Engineering at the University of South Alabama. "Although the erosion might seem alarming, it's usually just a natural, seasonal shift in the beach that doesn't cause any long-term shoreline change."

The shift from a summer beach to a winter beach usually occurs during the first or second storm of the season. The sand doesn't generally move much more after that unless the storms are severe.

This seasonal shift in the beach doesn't actually have anything to do with the temperature – just the storminess of the sea.

"In Southern California, where the winter storms are really strong, the beach seems to disappear, but it nearly always comes back," Douglass said. "The same thing happens along other American shorelines, including New Jersey, New York, Delaware, North Carolina and Florida."

The narrow winter beach can be a problem for areas that have experienced chronic erosion in addition to the normal winter/summer cycle. In those cases, the narrow winter beach may allow waves to reach homes and roads, causing damage. While the summer beach will be wider than the winter beach in these areas, some corrective action may be necessary to protect the homes when the beach is in its winter (narrow) condition.

When summer rolls around once again and the waves are milder, the sand will naturally migrate back near the shore. In some cases, the entire sand bar will move onshore. This makes the dry portion of the beach look much larger and is what most people are used to seeing when they arrive at the beach in search of the perfect day.

For more information about American beaches and shorelines, visit www.asbpa.org.

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