

A photograph of a flooded highway with a helicopter in the sky. The image is split vertically. The left side shows a concrete highway bridge over water, with the water level high enough to reach the bottom of the bridge structure. The right side is a dark, almost black background with a white silhouette of a helicopter flying in the upper right quadrant. The title 'Sea Level Rise' is written in a white, serif font across the middle of the image.

Sea Level Rise

Sea level rise causes land loss in low-lying coastal areas, such as coastal wetlands and barrier islands, and occurs at the highest rates where land is already subsiding. Sea level rise also exacerbates erosion and flooding as new areas become vulnerable to storm surge, wave action, and tides.¹ Climate change models predict that sea level risk will accelerate in the next century. This could result in billions of dollars in losses.

¹ Adapting to Climate Change: A Planning Guide for State Coastal Managers, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Office of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management, 2010.

Local Planning and Regulations

SLR-1 Map and Assess Vulnerability to Sea Level Rise

To better understand and assess local vulnerability to sea level rise, consider actions such as:

- Modeling various “what-if” scenarios to estimate potential vulnerabilities in order to develop sea level rise mitigation priorities.
- Using GIS to map hazard areas, at-risk structures, and associated hazards (e.g., flood and storm surge) to assess high-risk areas.
- Developing an inventory of public buildings and infrastructure that may be particularly vulnerable to sea level rise.
- Adding future conditions hydrology and areas that may be inundated by sea level rise to Digital Flood Insurance Rate Maps (DFIRM).

SLR-2 Manage Development in High-Risk Areas

Local governments can mitigate future losses resulting from sea level rise by regulating development in potential hazard areas through land use planning, including:

- Using zoning, subdivision regulations, and/or a special sea level rise overlay district to designate high-risk areas and specify the conditions for the use and development of specific areas.
- Promoting conservation and management of open space, wetlands, and/or sea level rise boundary zones to separate developed areas from high-hazard areas.
- Prohibiting the redevelopment of areas destroyed by storms or chronic erosion in order to prevent future losses.
- Encouraging compact community design in low-risk areas.
- Establishing setbacks in high-risk areas that account for potential sea level rise.

SRL-3 Prevent Infrastructure Expansion in High-Risk Areas

Future development can be protected from damage resulting from sea level rise through the following:

- Setting guidelines for annexation and service extensions in high-risk areas.
- Locating utilities and critical facilities outside of areas susceptible to sea level rise to decrease the risk of service disruption.
- Requiring all critical facilities to be built 1 foot above the 500-year flood elevation (considering wave action) or the predicted sea level rise level, whichever is higher.

Structure and Infrastructure Projects

SRL-4 Protect Buildings and Infrastructure

Existing structures, infrastructure, and critical facilities can be protected from sea level rise through the following:

- Acquiring and demolishing or relocating structures located in high-risk areas.
- Retrofitting structures to elevate them above potential sea level rise levels.
- Retrofitting critical facilities to be 1 foot above the 500-year flood elevation (considering wave action) or the predicted sea level rise level, whichever is higher.
- Replacing exterior building components with more hazard-resistant materials.

Natural Systems Protection

SLR-5 Preserve High-Hazard Areas as Open Space

Preserve open space to benefit natural resources and to reduce risk to structures from potential sea level rise. Techniques include:

- Developing an open space acquisition, reuse, and preservation plan targeting hazard areas.
- Developing a land banking program for the preservation and management of the natural and beneficial functions of flood hazard areas.
- Adopting rolling easements along the shoreline to promote natural migration of shorelines.
- Using transfer of development rights to allow a developer to increase densities on another parcel that is not at risk in return for keeping floodplain areas vacant.
- Compensating an owner for partial rights, such as easement or development rights, to prevent a property from being developed.

SLR-6 Protect and Restore Natural Buffers

Natural resources provide floodplain protection, riparian buffers, and other ecosystem services that mitigate sea level rise. It is important to preserve such functionality with the following:

- Examining the appropriate use of beach nourishment, sand scraping, dune-gap plugs, etc., for coastal hazards.
- Implementing dune restoration, plantings (e.g., sea oats), and use of natural materials.
- Examining the appropriate use of sediment-trapping vegetation, sediment mounds, etc., for coastal hazards.
- Planting sediment-trapping vegetation to buffer the coast against coastal storms by collecting sediment in protective features such as dunes or barrier islands.
- Performing sand scraping—using bulldozers to deposit the top foot of sand above the high-tide line—to reinforce the beach without adding new sand.
- Using sediment mounds to act as artificial dunes or plugs for natural dune gaps in order to slow the inland progress of storm-related wind and water.

Education and Awareness Programs

SLR-7 Increase Awareness of Sea Level Rise

Improve public awareness of risks due to sea level rise through outreach activities such as:

- Encouraging homeowners to purchase flood insurance.
- Using outreach programs to facilitate technical assistance programs that address measures that citizens can take or facilitate funding for mitigation measures.
- Annually distributing flood protection safety pamphlets or brochures to the owners of property in high-risk areas.
- Educating citizens about safety during flood conditions, including the dangers of driving on flooded roads.
- Using outreach programs to advise homeowners of risks to life, health, and safety.
- Offering GIS hazard mapping online for residents and design professionals.
- Disclosing the location of possible sea level rise areas to potential buyers.

Other sea level rise-related mitigation actions may also apply to other hazards. See the sections entitled “Flood,” “Storm Surge,” “Erosion,” and “Multiple Hazards” for other possible ideas.

Climate change is likely to exacerbate the effects of other hazards as well. See the other sections for possible ideas.