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Assateague Island Gets New Lease on Life

The northern eight miles of Assateague Island National Seashore will soon benefit from a critical beach renourishment project thanks to sand from the outer continental shelf authorized by the Minerals Management Service.

In a joint ceremony today at the Ocean City Coast Guard Station, the Minerals Management Service, National Park Service and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers broke ground on this important coastal restoration project. About 1.8 million cubic yards of sand will be placed on the beach this fall, and smaller amounts will be added each year to maintain the natural flow of sand that has been interrupted by the Ocean City jetties. The restoration is part of a 25-year plan to halt erosion of the island.

“Assateague Island was experiencing erosion on an average of 10 feet per year. That’s one of the highest levels of erosion in the nation, and threatened to make part of the park inaccessible to the public,” said Rebecca W. Watson, Interior’s assistant secretary for Land and Minerals Management. “Assateague is too valuable a public treasure to let that happen.”

A dredge will pump the federal sand from Great Gull Bank, a sand shoal lying five miles offshore of Assateague. MMS authorized use of the sand through an agreement signed last year with the National Park Service and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

“Through the combined efforts of several federal agencies, what is unique and worth preserving in our country will be maintained for the enjoyment of all,” said MMS director Johnnie Burton. “In keeping with our obligation to preserve and restore the environment, I am pleased that this project will enhance the overall health and safety of the area’s fragile habitat. We take seriously our commitment to help protect eroded beaches and U.S. coastlines.”

A project to rebuild the dunes at Assateague State Park is underway concurrently with the National Park Service project, with sand also coming from Great Gull Bank.

Assateague Island is an important national resource with more than 2 million annual visitors. The park is home to a variety of flora and fauna including the popular wild ponies. The island also serves as a major feeding ground for migratory birds, and showcases some of the few remaining undeveloped barrier island environments along the mid-Atlantic coast.

The Assateague Island project is the latest in a string of MMS beach renourishment efforts. For the past ten years, the agency has worked with coastal states to help restore damaged or eroded coastlines. Realizing that their sand supplies were nearly exhausted, the states of Maryland, Delaware and Virginia asked MMS to help find new supplies in federal waters. On the horizon are projects at Virginia Beach and Dam Neck Naval Facility in Virginia, Jacksonville Beach in Florida, and several beaches in the Carolinas.

Funding for the Assateague Island project will be shared by the Army Corps of Engineers and the National Park Service. MMS located the sand through a cooperative program with Maryland's Department of Natural Resources.

MMS is the federal agency in the U.S. Department of the Interior that manages the nation's oil, natural gas, and other mineral resources on the outer continental shelf in federal offshore waters. The agency also collects, accounts for, and disburses mineral revenues from federal and Indian leases. These revenues totaled nearly \$10 billion last year and more than \$120 billion since the agency was created in 1982. Annually, nearly \$1 billion from those revenues go into the Land and Water Conservation Fund for the acquisition and development of state and federal park and recreation lands.

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MMS Internet website address: <http://www.boem.gov>