

OTHER OPINIONS

Rising tides in Tidewater

BY JOHN BLANDIN • John Blandin is secretary and cofounder of Wetlands Watch (www.wetlandswatch.org), a Norfolk-based organization working statewide to protect and conserve wetlands.

In a cover story of last month's At Home section, we learned that taxpayers are footing the bill to lift waterfront houses out of flood zones, to the tune of \$4.5 million so far in Norfolk.

The problem is that the flood line is getting higher each year, with sea levels predicted to rise at least another two feet this century. While that doesn't sound like much, consider this: Three of the top 10 highest storm tides recorded in Norfolk happened in 2006. Add in a 2-foot rise in sea level, and the highest of those storm tides would nearly equal the flooding from Hurricane Isabel of 2003.

With our state and local governments spending \$4.5 million of our dollars helping folks fix yesterday's flood problems, how much are they spending to get ahead of the coming sea level rise and future problems?

Unfortunately, little to nothing.

While Maryland and North Carolina have nearly completed high-resolution mapping of their low-lying coastal areas with modern technologies, Virginia has no funding for providing counties or localities with these maps. Without precise maps, residents of Virginia will be left to the mercy of the tides and storms — and to decisions made by others with better information.

One group with better information includes insurance companies. State Farm, Nationwide and Allstate, representing 55 percent of the private insurance market in the mid-Atlantic, will no longer write new homeowner policies in coastal areas.

USAA is restricting new coverage in certain coastal areas, including sections of Hampton Roads and the Eastern Shore.

For these companies and many others, sea-level rise and increased flooding are real issues they are addressing today.

Sea-level rise is a real issue for our ecosystem as well as our houses. Wetlands Watch has been evaluating the impact of a 2-foot sea-level rise on the wetlands and coastal bays of Virginia and we have concluded that without action today, we will lose between 50 and 80 percent of our remaining tidal vegetated wetlands.

Losses of this magnitude would cause a collapse of fish and shellfish populations in the Chesapeake Bay. More than 60 percent of fish and shellfish species of the Bay lives in or depends upon vegetated wetlands. This means stripers, menhaden, blue crabs, spot, croaker, bay scallops, flounder, sea trout and every bait fish that other larger fish eat.

"No wetlands, no seafood," as our colleagues with the North Carolina Coastal Federation put it.

Sea-level rise will take away the waterfowl that depend on vegetated wetlands habitat. And it will take away the tourists, hunters, anglers and kayakers who enjoy the environment and fuel our economy. Sea-level rise will negate many of our efforts to restore the Chesapeake Bay.

Oddly enough, the state saw this coming long ago. In signing the Chesapeake 2000 agreement, Virginia promised to “evaluate the potential impact of climate change on the Chesapeake Bay watershed, particularly with respect to its wetlands, and consider potential management options.” It also requires each state to put wetlands management plans into 25 percent of the state’s land area.

Our state government will fail to meet both of these promises. In fact, Virginia is the only mid-Atlantic state without a focused effort to address the rise in sea levels.

Luckily, we still have time to work on this problem. There is time to begin mapping lowlying areas to get ahead of the problem. Then we need to figure out what we stand to lose, from physical structures and roads to habitats that will drown. Next we need to help localities put together a “tool kit” to protect the human and animal habitats that are at risk.

Our state and our region have the highest risk from sea level rise on the East Coast. If we don’t start making this issue a priority today, the \$4.5 million we have spent on elevating homes will be money down the drain.