

# Wilderness Breach Management Plan / Environmental Impact Statement

Scoping Newsletter #1

August 30, 2015

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Fire Island National Seashore  
New York



## WILDERNESS BREACH MANAGEMENT PLAN / ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

# Scoping Newsletter

The National Park Service (NPS) is in the process of making a decision to determine whether or not to close the breach that opened in the Otis Pike Fire Island High Dune Wilderness Area (the wilderness) in Fire Island National Seashore (the Seashore) during Hurricane Sandy.

To assist in the decision-making process, the National Park Service is preparing an environmental impact statement (plan/EIS). The plan/EIS will analyze a range of alternatives for managing the wilderness breach.

The desired outcome of this plan is to ensure the continued integrity of the natural and cultural features of the Seashore and its surrounding ecosystems while protecting human life and managing the risk of economic and physical damage to the surrounding areas.

Your participation is vital to our planning process. There are a number of ways to be involved throughout the

process, including participation in public scoping and the review of and comment on the draft plan/EIS.

The first step in the process is scoping. Scoping is an information gathering process through which we invite you to express your views on the information, issues, and alternatives that need to be addressed in the plan/EIS.

We have also included questions at the end of this document for you to consider in your comments. Responses to these questions, as well as any other comments you may wish to provide, will help us in framing the issues and alternatives that will be evaluated in the plan/EIS.

The scoping period for the plan/EIS is currently underway. Comments will be accepted for at least 30 days. Comment closure date will be posted at this website: <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/FireIslandBreachManagementPlan>



July 2015 aerial view of the wilderness breach. Photo credit: Charles Flagg

## How Were Breaches on the South Shore of Long Island Managed After Hurricane Sandy?

On October 29, 2012, Hurricane Sandy created three breaches in the barrier island system off the south shore of Long Island. Two of the breaches were filled in immediately in accordance with a 1997 multiagency breach contingency plan. The plan provides for monitoring to determine if the third breach, in the wilderness, will close naturally. On November 4, 2012, monitoring was initiated at the wilderness breach.

Since the wilderness breach was created, the National Park Service has continued to work with its partners

to monitor the breach. The breach has been relatively stable but not static. Since opening, the breach has expanded by migration of the west shoreline. From November 3, 2012, to April 27, 2015, the width of the breach increased 2,516 feet along the ocean and 732 feet along the bay. Analysis of Great South Bay (the bay) water level data indicates that the height of high tide has not changed significantly since before Hurricane Sandy. Analysis has also shown that the tidal phase (timing of high tide) in the vicinity of the breach has shifted approximately 20 minutes.

## What Is Federal Wilderness and How Is It Managed?

The Otis Pike Fire Island High Dune Wilderness Area is the only federally designated wilderness in New York State. Federal wilderness areas are wild, undeveloped, federal lands that have been designated and protected by Congress. Federal wilderness areas are to be managed “to preserve natural conditions” and to be “untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” The Seashore manages this wilderness area in accordance with the Wilderness Act (Public Law 88-577), the 1980 legislation (Public Law 96-585) that established this wilderness, National Park Service policies, and the *Fire Island National Seashore Wilderness Management Plan*. None of these management directives preclude closing a breach in the wilderness. However, to be consistent with these management directives, the National Park Service must

conduct a thorough evaluation through monitoring, research, and other relevant assessments of the potential benefits and the potential consequences of allowing the breach to remain open or allowing the breach to be closed.



November 4, 2012 aerial view of the wilderness breach.

## What Are the Potential Benefits and Consequences of an Open Breach?

Breaching is a natural barrier island process. Allowing breaches to function naturally has substantial benefits to barrier island systems. These include sand movement into the bay that facilitates salt marsh development, widening the barrier island, increasing resiliency for future storms, and providing spawning grounds and habitat for marine species. The open breach has also improved bay water quality near the breach.

While storm events and breaches are part of a barrier island's natural processes, allowing this breach to remain

open carries the risk of potential adverse impacts to mainland development from flooding, loss of life, and other economic and physical damage. An open breach can also affect sediment budgets along downdrift parts of the ocean coast and changes in circulation in the bay. In addition, the breach divides the Seashore into two islands, which has altered park operations, visitor experience, and emergency access.



## What Is the Purpose of This Plan/EIS?

The purpose of the plan/EIS is to assist the NPS in making a decision on how to manage the breach that was created in the wilderness during Hurricane Sandy. The process will include consultation with federal, state and local agencies that have a regulatory interest or special expertise related to the proposed action and will provide opportunities for public input in the decision making process. The desired outcome of this plan is to ensure the continued integrity of the natural and cultural features at Fire Island National Seashore and the surrounding ecosystems while protecting human life and

managing the risk of economic and physical damage to the surrounding areas.



Photo credit: Derek Rogers

## What Are Potential Management Strategies?

The following options have been identified to represent a range of alternatives for management of the wilderness breach.

- **Leave the breach open and managed under natural conditions.** Under this alternative, growth or closure of the breach would be determined by natural barrier island processes.
- **Close the breach.** This alternative would provide that the breach is immediately filled and closed mechanically.
- **Leave the breach open and establish procedures for closing the breach if certain conditions occur.** This alternative would likely require the development of criteria and thresholds for assessing benefits, impacts, and risks; monitoring to provide data to assess benefits, impacts, and risks; and periodic evaluation of benefits, impacts, and risks.
- **Stabilize the breach to provide a permanent inlet** connecting Great South Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. This alternative is inconsistent with NPS policies and the Federal Wilderness Act.



## How Can I Provide My Views on the Issues and Alternatives That Should Be Considered?

The National Park Service has developed questions that may assist you in thinking about management of the wilderness breach. Please feel free to respond to these questions or provide other information that may help us prepare the plan/EIS.

1. What issues or concerns do you have about the wilderness breach that the National Park Service needs to consider in preparing the plan/EIS?
2. Does the desired outcome described on page 1 reflect what you think needs to be accomplished through this planning process?
3. If not, what else do you think needs to be accomplished?
4. Are there other strategies for managing the breach that have not been presented that you think should be considered?

You can provide comments electronically at:

[http://parkplanning.nps.gov/  
FireIslandBreachManagementPlan](http://parkplanning.nps.gov/FireIslandBreachManagementPlan)

Or, you can mail comments to:

Fire Island National Seashore  
Attn: Elizabeth Rogers  
Wilderness Breach Environmental Impact Statement  
120 Laurel Street  
Patchogue, NY 11772-3596

Comments will be accepted for at least 30 days.  
Comment closure date will be posted at the website to the left.

Before including your address, phone number, email address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment—including your personal identifying information—may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.



Photo credit: Derek Rogers

## What Are the Next Steps?

The following schedule highlights the next steps in the wilderness breach planning and environmental compliance process:

Notice of intent to prepare the plan/EIS published in the <i>Federal Register</i>	July 2015
Public scoping period begins and electronic distribution of scoping newsletter <b>(WE ARE HERE)</b>	September 2015
The scoping period for the plan/EIS is currently underway	September 2015
The National Park Service reviews public scoping comments, gathers data, and drafts preliminary alternatives	Fall 2015
Draft plan/EIS to public for review and comment	Summer 2016