

# Wilderness Breach Management Plan / Environmental Impact Statement

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National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
Fire Island National Seashore  
New York



WILDERNESS BREACH MANAGEMENT PLAN / ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

## Public Review Notice



The National Park Service (NPS) will release for public review the Draft Fire Island Wilderness Breach Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (Draft Breach Plan/EIS) in the next few weeks. This document evaluates alternatives for managing the wilderness breach that opened in the Otis Pike Fire Island High Dune Wilderness Area (Fire Island Wilderness) in Fire Island National Seashore (the Seashore) during Hurricane Sandy. The Draft Breach Plan/EIS was prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the National Historic Preservation Act, and in compliance with all applicable laws, regulations, and policies. It was developed following new guidelines established in the recently

released NPS *NEPA Handbook* (available at: <http://www.nps.gov/applications/npspolicy/DOrders.cfm>). As such, the Draft Breach Plan/EIS provides a focused evaluation of specific issues that drive the decision, which include concerns for human safety, economic and infrastructure damage related to flooding, and natural processes.

The public comment period for the Draft Breach Plan/EIS will end 45 days after the formal release of the document in the *Federal Register*. The plan is available and comments may be submitted online at: <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/FireIslandBreachManagementPlan>.

### You're Invited to a Public Meeting!

We invite you to attend this public meeting to learn more about the project and provide comments:

**Please see the PEPC site and local media for updates on the specific date and time:**  
<http://parkplanning.nps.gov/FireIslandBreachManagementPlan>

Patchogue - Watch Hill  
Ferry Terminal  
150 West Ave.  
Patchogue, NY 11772

### We look forward to answering your questions

The purpose of this meeting is to answer your questions on the Draft Breach Plan/EIS in order to help in your formal comment submissions on the plan. The Draft Breach Plan/EIS will be available for your review at least two weeks before the meeting, and we hope you take the opportunity to read it in order to bring questions with you. When you register at the meeting, questions will be collected and organized so our National Park Service staff can address as many as possible in the time allotted. There will be a presentation on the Draft Breach Plan/EIS and how to navigate the document. The presentation will touch on the science supporting the plan but will mainly focus on the NEPA process and alternatives. Following the presentation and formal Q&A, National Park Service staff will be available for additional questions on the document. Formal comments on the Draft Breach Plan/EIS can only be accepted in writing, the discussion at the meeting is intended to help you better understand the project and analysis.

## 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, New York, including one within the Fire Island Wilderness. Two of the breaches were filled in immediately in accordance with a 1996 multiagency Breach Contingency Plan (BCP). The BCP also provided for monitoring to discern if the third breach would close naturally.

Since the occurrence of the wilderness breach, the National Park Service has worked with its partners to monitor the breach, and it has been a relatively

stable but dynamic natural feature. Since opening, the breach has expanded through migration of the west shoreline. As of May 2016, the wilderness breach on the northern shoreline was 1,476 ft (450 m), and the width of the southern shoreline of the breach was 2,345 ft (716 m). Analysis of Great South 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 wilderness breach has shifted approximately 20 minutes.

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

Federal wilderness areas are wild, undeveloped, federal lands that have been designated and protected by Congress. The Fire Island Wilderness is the only federally designated wilderness in New York State. 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.” Management of the Fire Island Wilderness must comply with the Wilderness Act (Public Law 88-577), the 1980 legislation that established the Fire Island Wilderness (Public Law 96-585), the 1983 Wilderness Management Plan, and the anticipated 2016 Fire Island National Seashore Wilderness Stewardship Plan and Backcountry Camping Policy. None of these management directives preclude closing a breach in the wilderness.



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

## Potential Benefits and Consequences of an Open Breach

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

While storm events and breaches are part of a barrier island's natural processes, allowing the wilderness

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. And finally, the breach has divided the Seashore into two islands, which has altered park operations, visitor experience, and emergency access.

## Purpose and Need for the Breach Plan

The purpose of the Draft Breach Plan/EIS is to assist the National Park Service in making a decision on how to manage the breach that was created in the Fire Island Wilderness during Hurricane Sandy. The desired outcome of the plan is to ensure the continued

integrity of the natural and cultural features at Fire Island National Seashore and its surrounding ecosystems, while protecting human life and managing the risk of economic and physical damage to the surrounding areas.

## Potential Management Strategies (Alternatives)



The National Park Service developed alternatives for addressing the project goals and environmental concerns based on input from the public, other agencies, and subject matter experts. Subject matter experts were invited to attend a two-day workshop in January 2016 and participated in facilitated discussions regarding the current state of the science on issues relevant to the Draft Breach Plan/EIS. Data and information collected from the workshop, published and unpublished research, and scientific information from professional sources were compiled into a Technical Synthesis Report that serves as the scientific basis for the Draft Breach Plan/EIS. The Draft Breach Plan/EIS incorporates by reference the information from the Technical Synthesis Report. Both documents are available online at the project website: <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/FireIslandBreachManagementPlan>.

After careful consideration of public and agency concerns and of input from subject matter experts, three management actions, or “alternatives,” and their potential impacts were evaluated. The alternatives are described in detail in Chapter 2 of the Draft Breach Plan/EIS, and Chapter 4 outlines the impacts of implementing the alternatives. The Draft Breach Plan/EIS analyzes the following alternatives:

### **Alternative 1:** *Closure Using Mechanical Processes*

Under alternative 1, the wilderness breach would be mechanically filled and closed as soon as possible.

### **Alternative 2:** *Status Determined Entirely by Natural Processes (No Action)*

Under alternative 2, the evolution, growth, and/or closure of the breach would be determined by natural barrier island processes and no human intervention would occur to close the breach or to reopen the breach if it were to close by natural processes.

### **Alternative 3:** *No Human Intervention Unless Established Criteria Are Exceeded (Proposed Action and NPS Preferred)*

Under alternative 3, the evolution, growth, and/or closure of the breach would be determined by natural barrier island processes, and human intervention to close the breach would occur only “to prevent loss of life, flooding, and other severe economic and physical damage to the Great South Bay and surrounding areas.” The NPS would develop and adopt criteria that indicate the breach poses a threat to life and/or property. As long as monitoring data show that the established criteria have not been exceeded, the NPS would allow the breach to be shaped entirely by natural processes with no human intervention. The breach may remain open or it may close naturally. If monitoring data indicate that the established criteria have been exceeded, the breach would be mechanically closed as soon as practicable.

Alternative 3 is identified as the NPS preferred alternative because it allows the breach to be managed according to NPS resource management policies and wilderness directives while allowing closure if necessary to prevent “loss of life, flooding, and other severe economic and physical damage to the Great South Bay and surrounding areas.”

## Public Comment Period

Public and agency scoping for this project was conducted between August 31 and October 8, 2015. Scoping is an information gathering process through which the public is invited to express views on the information, issues, and alternatives that need to be addressed in the Draft Breach Plan/EIS.

Your participation is vital to the planning process. A 45-day public comment period on the Draft Breach Plan/EIS will be announced. During this comment period, you are invited to review and provide comments on the plan.

All comments on the Draft Breach Plan/EIS will be reviewed and considered. Substantive comments will be identified and responded to in a Comment Analysis Report that will appear in the Final Breach Plan/EIS. A substantive comment is a comment that raises, debates, or questions a point of fact or policy discussed in the Draft Breach Plan/EIS. Comments in favor of or against the proposed action or alternatives or comments that only agree or disagree with NPS policy are not considered substantive. Although all comments will be read and considered in shaping the Final Breach Plan/EIS, only those determined to be substantive will be explicitly addressed by the NPS response.

The Draft Breach Plan/EIS can be downloaded from the project website: <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/FireIslandBreachManagementPlan> or viewed in hard copy at:  
Fire Island National Seashore Headquarters,  
120 Laurel Street, Patchogue, NY 11772.

The document will remain available for public and agency review and comment for 45 days after its release via a Notice of Availability (NOA) in the *Federal Register*. We invite you to attend the public meeting to learn more about the project and provide comments; please see our PEPC site for the most up to date information on specific dates. Comments on the Draft Breach Plan/DEIS may be submitted electronically at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/FireIslandBreachManagementPlan>.

Written comments may be mailed to:  
Superintendent, Fire Island National Seashore,  
120 Laurel Street, Patchogue, NY 11772.  
Mailed comments must be postmarked within 45 days of the published date of the NOA in the *Federal Register*.

*Please note that your entire comment, including your personal identifying information, may become publicly available at any time and as required by the Freedom of Information Act. We cannot guarantee that your personal information will be withheld from public review.*



## Next Steps and Schedule

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

Release for public review of Draft Breach Plan/EIS; hold public meeting <b>(WE ARE HERE)</b>	Please see <a href="http://parkplanning.nps.gov/FireIslandBreachManagementPlan">http://parkplanning.nps.gov/FireIslandBreachManagementPlan</a> for more specifics on exact dates.
Respond to comments on Draft Breach Plan/EIS and incorporate into Final Breach Plan/EIS	Fall 2016
Release Final Breach Plan/EIS	Winter 2016
Issue Record of Decision	Summer 2017