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Down with Dredging

Environmental groups and legislators call for sweeping coastal management reforms.

Three mainstream conservation groups--Caribbean Conservation Corp. (the nation's oldest sea turtle conservation group), Audubon of Florida and 1,000 Friends of Florida--are demanding a radical re-evaluation of the state's coastal management policy.

Florida, they say, has encouraged high-risk development and endangered beaches by being lax about oceanfront construction and using "beach nourishment" and armoring to shore up beachfront property. Both practices have a history of serious, cascading environmental impacts to turtles, essential fish habitat and public access. (See Florida Sportsman's three-part investigative report in "Conservation Front," April, May and June issues.) Russell Schweiss, a spokesman for the Department of Environmental Protection, said Florida Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Colleen Castille had met with the environmentalists and is "encouraging debate" on coastal issues.

The groups also helped tweak a Senate bill that would make questioning these policies easier. It will be considered in the 2005 legislative session, which began Monday.

A sweeping coastal and marine conservation bill sponsored by Sen. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland, and co-sponsored by Sen. Ken Pruitt, R-Port St. Lucie, requests a review of "state programs that encourage inappropriate growth in fragile or hazard-prone areas."

Both Pruitt and Dockery said the purpose of the bill is to explore much broader protections for coastal and marine ecosystems, and establish statewide priorities for research. With the state spending tens of millions of dollars a year on sand dredging and replacement, Dockery said more research could be done.

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