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New Jersey Lawmakers Pass Coastal and Ocean Protection Bill

TRENTON, New Jersey, January 10, 2008 (ENS) - The New Jersey Assembly passed a bill Monday that would establish a New Jersey Coastal and Ocean Protection Council to help safeguard the state's resources.

The state Senate passed the same bill on December 10, 2007 and environmental groups now are asking that Governor Jon Corzine sign the bill into law.

"The Jersey coast is central to the state's identity, and this new council will advance the state's ability to protect and restore the natural systems that we rely on for food, recreation and jobs," said Benson Chiles of the nonprofit Environmental Defense and the Coastal Ocean Coalition, a network of state and national environmental organizations working to revitalize the nation's most critical marine areas.

The nine-member New Jersey Coastal and Ocean Protection Council would consist of agency staff and members of the public working to prevent depletion of marine resources through adopting ecosystem based management approaches.

Ecosystem management moves beyond traditional species-by-species, problem-by-problem management to take account of factors that sustain healthy oceans such as food web interactions and the availability of suitable habitat.

The council would have the power to make recommendations to the New Jersey Commissioner for Environmental Protection that will protect, maintain and restore coastal and ocean resources, and could study, consider and make plans for ocean and coastal protection.



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Boats on New Jersey's Barnegat Bay (Photo by Ted Kerwin)

The council would be empowered to hold a public hearing at least once a year to take testimony from the public concerning ecosystem based management approaches. The council must present a report of its activities, findings, and recommendations to the commissioner within one year after its organizational meeting, and biennially thereafter.

"New Jersey residents depend on the ocean and coasts for food, recreation, and jobs, but the world's oceans are in a state of silent collapse - and New Jersey is not immune to this devastation," said Sarah Chasis, Ocean Initiative director for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

"A Coastal and Ocean Protection Council would help coordinate the state's efforts to restore our coastal and ocean systems, and establish New Jersey as a leading state in marine resources policy," she said.

More than 1.5 million migratory shorebirds and more than 50 different species of finfish and shellfish are found in New Jersey's coastal and ocean waters and wetlands.

Annually, the Jersey shore generates more than \$16 billion from tourism and in 2006, commercial fishing industries in New Jersey landed more than 152 million pounds of fish and shellfish, worth nearly \$143 million.

But pollution, destruction of productive marine habitat, over-development, and increased strain on fish stocks are endangering the health of New Jersey's ocean and bay systems.

Ninety-seven percent of New Jersey's tidal rivers and 24 percent of its bays are restricted for shellfish harvesting because of bacterial pollution. The Jersey shore experienced more than 130 days of beach closings and advisories due to pollution in 2006.

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In addition, urban construction has now impacted a third of Barnegat Bay's estuary system; and a third of New Jersey's most important commercial and recreational saltwater fish and shellfish are depleted or are being overfished.

"Last summer's brown tides, sewage spills, and dissolved oxygen issues are all indicators that there's a problem," said Jeff Tittel of New Jersey Sierra Club. "They are the canary in the coal mine, and the canary is in a coma."

The bill is an important response to the shore's plea for help," said Mike Pisauo of the New Jersey Environmental Lobby. "We are eager for the governor to sign this bill as soon as possible so that the council can get to work."

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