


Winter 2012

# Superstorm Sandy Changed the Shape of Connecticut

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# Superstorm

## Changed the Shape of Connecticut

*Sandy was a prophetic name for the storm that furiously scooped up dunes all along the shoreline, flooding towns and leaving some residents wondering where their beach went and others without homes or docks. Among the questions towns must consider now and in the future is whether or not to try to restore coastal areas to their former state, given that there is no guarantee that a future weather event won't impact the same location.*

By Peg VanPatten

**Superstorm Sandy**, followed quickly by a Nor'easter, arrived in our region just in time to cancel Halloween. While the wind wasn't up to hurricane strength in most of Connecticut, its storm surges and high winds still caused plenty of damage. The timing (full moon, high tides) made the storm surge much higher than normal. The sheer size of Sandy, at about 800 miles in diameter, and the collision of an opposing weather front with the tropical cyclone system are other reasons why Sandy is called "Superstorm" or even "Frankenstorm".

While damages were highest in New Jersey and New York, Connecticut was one of the three states declared a federal disaster area. About 11,400 residents in Fairfield, Middlesex, New Haven and New London counties, as well as two tribal nations, have registered for federal assistance so far. On November 29, Governor Malloy announced that he was asking for \$3.2 billion in federal funds to make infrastructure improvements. Total damages are estimated at around \$60 billion for all areas affected.

Homes and businesses suffered costly damages. Four of the 149 lives lost to Sandy were in Connecticut. Dunes and docks were ripped away; the shape of the coastline changed. Shellfish beds were closed for extended periods of time until possible impacts from pollution carried by the storm could be assessed. Now towns face the prospect of rebuilding and

# Sandy



Waterford town beach, Waterford, CT (left and right, Pequot Ave., New London, CT. Photos by Juliana Barrett.

restoring in the face of uncertainty. Change to Shoreline towns and cities have asked Connecticut DEEP, University of Connecticut, experts and Sea Grant for advice.

Connecticut Sea Grant responded by using a new web page and social media to provide advice and point the way to resources, first to help citizens prepare and later to recover from the storm. Now it's time for the bigger challenge--what comes next? There are no easy answers in place.

Connecticut Sea Grant and the UConn Center for Land Use Education and Research (CLEAR) sponsored a meeting in Old Saybrook in November for some of the coastal municipalities, land trusts and private beach associations to voice their concerns and questions pertaining to changes to coastal ecosystems in the aftermath of Sandy. The most frequent problems reported, according to Juliana Barrett, Connecticut Sea Grant's coastal habitat expert, were dune loss or damage,

potential loss of public access to beaches, and extensive erosion and movement of sand in many areas. Federal and state agency representatives, including FEMA, USACE, USFWS, and CT Dept of Energy and Environmental Protection attended the meeting to describe agency resources, responsibilities and limitations in response to the questions and concerns.

Among the questions towns must consider is whether or not to restore coastal habitats, given that there is no guarantee that a future weather event won't impact the same location.

Both Sandy and Tropical Storm Irene are examples of extreme weather events, which are expected to increase as the climate continues to warm. The challenge to communities now is to rebuild in ways that will better withstand the ravages of nature, given rising sea level and extreme weather.

As we usher in 2013, discussion will continue on not only how, but if, it will be advisable to restore our shores.



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