

# Cost of incomplete erosion study surpasses \$1M

By Mark Noack [ [mark@hmbreview.com](mailto:mark@hmbreview.com) ] | Posted: Wednesday, March 18, 2015 3:29 pm

To many observers, the best way to halt erosion at Surfer's Beach is obvious: Take the sand built up on the east end of Pillar Point Harbor and use it to nourish the depleted shore on the other side of the breakwater.

Since 2009, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has been studying this very idea with the hope to open up \$5 million in federal funds to pay for it. Now, six years in, that analysis and environmental report remain incomplete, but their costs continue to mount.

This week, Army Corps officials reported they have spent more than \$1 million so far on the erosion analysis, albeit with little to show the public as a result. Half of this expense is being covered by the San Mateo County Harbor District, which is acting as the local partner for the study.

For their part, Army Corps officials emphasize the analysis is nearly complete. Researchers should be finished by the end of this year, said Victoria McAllister, an Army Corps spokeswoman.

"Everyone tells me they're in the final phase," McAllister said. "You can imagine there's a great deal of figuring things out with the regulations, rules and relationships."

Exactly how this money was spent was not immediately clear. McAllister could not provide a breakdown of the costs.

Army Corps officials have emphasized their study was no simple task, requiring computer modeling to see the outcome of different ideas. Through the process, they also encountered problems with staff turnover, and the study was handed off to four separate project heads.

Historically, the Surfer's Beach section of coastline has experienced severe erosion, losing about a meter of land each year on average, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. Many scientists say this erosion is intensified by ocean waves being deflected off the Pillar Point Harbor breakwater, a structure designed and built by the Army Corps.

In recent years, coastal advocates and county officials have watched with trepidation as the beach bluffs south of the harbor continued to lose ground. As the Army Corps study continued, other agencies decided



## Moving the sands of time

Sand from the dunes within the breakwater at Pillar Point Harbor could be used to mitigate erosion at Surfer's Beach, which is seen in the background. Dean Coppola / Review

to take action rather than wait for the analysis to be complete. Most recently, San Mateo County officials moved forward a \$1.6 million project to put a protective barrier south of the breakwater.

“Had the sand been replenished, we probably wouldn’t have had to do that project,” said Supervisor Don Horsley. “It could have had a major impact for us, if we could get them to do something.”

There are no guarantees that the Army Corps study would actually provide any federal funding to fix the erosion problem. The study would examine the different options for ameliorating the erosion problem as well as any environmental challenges. Federal economists also have to prove that the beach and nearby highway are worth the expense of saving them. In past interviews, officials have indicated that standard would be a high bar to meet. In any outcome, Army Corps officials say their final analysis would be freely available for other agencies to use.

Rather than wait, local officials have begun to look elsewhere for help. Harbor District officials have put forward Surfer’s Beach for a pilot program to study beach replenishment through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.