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Home > Senate Oceans Subcommittee reviews the first decade of the NOAA Digital Coast Program

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The Senate Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries, and Coast Guard held a hearing on June 5 to review the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Digital Coast program. The program provides a free online database to help meet the unique needs of the coastal management community. The Digital Coast website incorporates various data sets, ranging from economic data to satellite imagery, that come from many sources – all of which are vetted by NOAA. Using this database, NOAA offers visualization and predictive tools, training courses on utilizing the tools, and information on coastal storms, water quality, and flooding vulnerability.

Subcommittee Chairman Dan Sullivan (R-AK), a strong supporter of the program, noted in his opening statement that the Digital Coast program enables our nation's coastal communities to better manage resources, respond to emergencies, and plan for long term coastal resilience. Over the course of the hearing, the witnesses reported on how Digital Coasts operates and what it accomplished in the ten years since its establishment. Nicole LeBoeuf, the Deputy Assistant Administrator of NOAA's National Ocean Service (NOS), reported that one third of all U.S. coastal communities have utilized Digital Coast and that its current benefits exceeded costs to taxpayers by a ratio of three to one. During the Q&A of the hearing, Senator Roger Wicker (R-MS) asked how the NOAA program saves taxpayer money and contributes to economic development. Paul Barnes, the Geographic Information Systems Director of Harrison County, Mississippi, explained that the economic benefits are mainly associated with community resilience. "If we plan properly," Barnes stated, "We are able to ensure that we do not build infrastructure or public facilities or even residential structures in areas that are vulnerable... By building outside of those vulnerable areas, we are ensuring that we recover more quickly in the event of a disaster... The real economic development issue is being able to recover quickly, provide services, (and) generate revenue again."

LeBoeuf also outlined Digital Coast's strategic plan through 2021, which includes strengthening relationships with private and public sectors and providing improved decision support tools and training. Tyson Fettes, the Register of Deeds for Racine County, Wisconsin, reported on how the Digital Coast platform improved and facilitated Racine County's response to a severe flooding event that occurred last June. David Millar, the Government Accounts Director for the multinational geoscience data services corporation Fugro, recommended that the program increase its marketing to improve awareness outside the government sector on the tools and resources Digital Coast provides.

Last year, Subcommittee Ranking Member Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) introduced the Digital Coast Act (S.110) to authorize the NOAA Digital Coast program. S. 110 unanimously passed the Senate last May and currently awaits a vote in the House. A bipartisan companion bill was also introduced in the House (H.R. 4062) in October and referred to the Subcommittee on Water, Power and Oceans.

Sources: E&E News; Library of Congress; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation.
