

NSW Councils advised to sidestep IPCC models

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The NSW government will order councils to study the scientific evidence for sea-level rise on a beach-by-beach basis, amid fears that many local authorities may be undermining property values by imposing punitive planning conditions based on predictions contained in reports of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

The Great Lakes Council on the mid-north coast has told one home owner who wants to extend his house that, while it may be approved, he may have to demolish it in coming decades and restore the whole site to its natural state pre-settlement. The council is relying on the IPCC model that predicts sea-level rise at nearly 10 times the actual rate recorded in recent decades - 40cm by 2050 - compared with just more than 4cm, based on a projection of the recent historical record.

It has ignored those elements of a scientific report the council itself commissioned, which says that rather than becoming more eroded over time, Boomerang Beach and Blueys Beach have actually been getting bigger, with several natural factors leading them to accumulate more sand.

In September last year, the O'Farrell government ditched the previous, Labor government's policy of instructing councils to apply the IPCC predictions of sea-level rises in their planning for coastal hazards.

That followed revelations in The Australian that owners of 62 beachfront properties at Lake Cathie, on the NSW mid-north coast, had suffered huge drops in the value of their homes after the Port Macquarie-Hastings Council placed notations on their Section 149 planning certificates saying they were at risk of coastal erosion, based on the IPCC model.

Special Minister of State Chris Hartcher said at the time "the NSW Chief Scientist and Engineer has identified uncertainty in the projected rate of future sea-level rise given that the scientific knowledge in the field is continually evolving".

But some local councils, including Great Lakes Council, have chosen to stick to the IPCC predictions.

The council has defined Blueys and Boomerang beaches, the first to be analysed in a new round of coastal assessments, as subject to coastal erosion hazard, and has submitted a local environmental plan to the Planning and Infrastructure Minister, Brad Hazzard, who will consider it in the new year.

But the minister's department will soon issue a circular to local coastal councils, in which, Mr Hazzard indicated to The Australian, he expects councils to adopt a commonsense approach to sea-level rises based in part on the science of what is actually happening in each location.

"The NSW government has been concerned at inconsistent treatment of people's properties by councils on Section 149 certificates," a spokeswoman for Mr Hazzard said.

"The NSW Liberals and Nationals seek to work with councils in partnership - in this case with coastal hazard policy which takes into account local topography and conditions.

"Councils which fail to respond to their communities can ultimately be held accountable by their residents/electors."

One resident and elector who is outraged by the Great Lakes Council is Beverley Harbutt, whose home is on absolute beachfront at Boomerang Beach.

Ms Harbutt said she had been facing increasing financial pressures due to a marital break-up some years ago and had been forced to move in with her son Mark and his partner and put the house out to holiday rental.

She has tried for several years to sell the house, but prospective buyers lost interest when they found out the local council had designated it as subject to coastal hazard from rising sea levels, and had imposed severe planning restrictions, she said.

"It's wearing on the soul, on the mind, and on the pocket," she said.

Mark Harbutt said council policy had debased his mother's place by \$1 million. The house had been valued at \$2.7m and the best offer coming in now was only \$1.5m.

David and Kerri Perks applied to build an extension to their house at Blueys Beach, but in October the council said any such consent would be time-limited because of the IPCC sea-level rise predictions.

In 2060, the council said, the Perks or subsequent owners would have to commission a specialist consultant to do a report and apply for an extension of the consent. If the consent were not granted, the council said, "all buildings and/or works associated with the development must be removed from the land (and) the owner of the land must return the landform of the subject land to the pre-development state and suitably revegetate the land".

Mr Perks said he regarded the policy as "draconian", and withdrew the application.

The Great Lakes Council based its decisions on a scientific report it commissioned from engineering consultants Worley Parsons, completed in 2010.

The consultants reported that the two beaches were topographically robust. "Evidence from photogrammetric data indicates that Boomerang Beach and Blueys Beach have the ability to recover

relatively quickly from major erosion events" such as big storms, they said.

A number of identifiable factors related to sea patterns meant the beaches were actually getting deeper with more sand, pushing back the sea.

The net volume increase in the historical record at Boomerang Beach was 3400 cubic metres a year, Worley Parsons determined, and that for Blueys Beach it was 2000cu m a year.

However, Worley Parsons said the data was not complete.

It recommended further studies and said it would put aside the fact that the 50-year trend was that one of the beaches was getting bigger.

Worley Parsons applied the then Labor government's predictions of sea-level rise based on the IPCC reports, as part of what it called a conservative "precautionary principle".

Great Lakes Council spokeswoman Melissa Bawden told The Australian "the science used to determine the IPCC levels is adequate". She said: "As such council has adopted the previous state government benchmarks for its planning purposes."

These predict that sea levels will rise by 40cm by 2050 and by 90cm by 2100.

The Worley Parsons report contained a section on historical sea-level rise in Australia, quoting a 2004 CSIRO study that said "averaged around Australia, the relative sea-level rise from 1920 to 2000 was about 1.2mm a year".

The report also quoted a 1999 Department of Defence study that similarly estimated that the rate of relative sea-level rise at Newcastle, about 100km south of Boomerang Beach, from 1967 to 1999, was 1.18mm a year.

If these historical rates continue, the sea level at Boomerang Beach would rise 4.3cm by 2050, and 10.3cm by 2100, or about a tenth of the council predictions.

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