



Santa Monica Beach Dunes | FAQ

WHY DUNE RESTORATION?

What is the scope of the project?

Santa Monica Bay's iconic beaches are recognized worldwide, serving as the heart of the coastal lifestyle that defines our region. They need our protection in the face of ongoing climate impacts. To reduce the threat of coastal erosion, flooding, and inevitable sea-level rise, The Bay Foundation is actively growing sand dunes at Santa Monica Beach. In 2016, we built our first site, covering roughly three acres near the Annenberg Beach House in northern Santa Monica Beach. We built out an additional five acres in 2024. Following the success of these pilot dunes, the Coastal Commission has permitted an expansion of the coastal dunes to over 30 acres – from the Santa Monica Pier south to the border of Venice Beach. This Phase 3 work – the largest to date – will begin in February 2026 and last several months.

Before (2015)



After (2025)



What are the benefits of restoration?

In addition to being the first line of defense for the coast, the public benefits of these projects include beautifying the developed coastline, educating the public about the importance of natural landscapes, promoting tourism based on environmental values, and restoring native habitat for rare and endangered coastal flora and fauna. Perhaps most importantly, these projects serve as examples of strategies that balance priorities of both coastal resilience and public recreational use.

What is the work plan?

Teams of biologists, landscape crews, volunteers, and schoolchildren will stake out and establish the borders of the Santa Monica Beach Dunes and then place seeds in the sand. Over the coming months, teams will weed and clean the dune sites to help the plants and wildlife thrive and keep the beach looking beautiful. We will be placing thin metal posts and natural fiber rope along the edge of the dune sites. Small blue signs will help inform the public about the project and direct beachgoers to open areas.

What does restoration actually look like?

Small plants will grow, spreading along the surface of the beach and slowly accumulating sand. As the plants get buried by the blowing sand, they continue to grow. The sand and the plants start to form dunes. The plants will flower and produce seeds. Migrating birds, butterflies, and other wildlife will use the dune habitat to rest, feed, nest, and mate. After several years, the dunes will be about three feet tall, and the sand will become compacted and held together by the roots and branches of the plants. Washed-up seaweed and driftwood will scatter along the shoreline and along the dune borders.

Why are we messing with Mother Nature?

We're actually returning local beaches back to their wild state – before years of coastal development flattened natural dunes and removed native vegetation from the sand. By reclaiming our beaches' natural state, we are giving them their best chance for long-term survival in the face of sea level rise, erosion, and flooding. Coastal dune habitat is rare in Southern California. By putting it back we are providing habitat for rare birds, butterflies, and other wildlife.



Sea-level rise? I don't see any flooding at Santa Monica Beach.

While not obvious when gazing at the ocean, sea level rise is happening faster than you think and will be more damaging than previously anticipated. The state estimates that sea levels could rise as much as three feet at local beaches by 2100 ([California Sea Level Rise Guidance, 2024](#)). Even a couple of feet of sea-level rise — on top of normal tides, seasonal variations, and storm surges — could significantly reduce the usable width of the beach over time and cause shoreline “retreat” (i.e. the beach migrating inland).

Why don't we just build more seawalls to protect the shoreline?

Seawalls may give a temporary sense of security, but they simply do not prevail over time. Mother Nature always wins. Seawalls cause erosion, flattening the beach in front of them. Seawalls provide some protection for things behind them; they don't protect the beach in front of them.

WILL THIS AFFECT MY BEACHGOING EXPERIENCE?

Will the dunes make it harder to get to the actual beach?

Beach access and visibility will be preserved — ocean-facing sides remain open along the waterline, and the project won't obstruct entrances to beach facilities.

Won't these new dunes eat up valuable space on the beach and restrict recreational activities?

Over 80% of the beach will remain open for recreation. The dune sites will have many large paths and leave plenty of room for volleyball and other recreational uses. The dunes will stretch the length of the beach from Venice to the Palisades, leaving plenty of open space along the entirety of Santa Monica Beach. The dunes balance the need for recreation and shoreline access with habitat for wildlife and a beach that can stand up to sea level rise.

Could these new “hidden” dunes become a haven for illegal and criminal activity?

The dune areas remain open and visible. The dunes support sparse low plants, and gently sloped sand, not dense cliffs or “hidden” corners — making them no more attractive for illicit activity than other parts of the beach.

Could these dunes be a potential fire hazard for nearby homes?

The risk of fire is extremely low. The dune-restoration plan calls for low-growing, coastal native plants that are salt-tolerant and not fire-prone dry brush. The vegetation is sparsely distributed (not dense thickets), adapted to capture and stabilize wind-blown sand, reduce erosion, and buffer storms/sea-level rise.

WHO'S LEADING THIS RESTORATION?

Who is overseeing this project?

The Santa Monica Beach Dunes restoration is led by The Bay Foundation in conjunction with the City of Santa Monica and many local partners. The Santa Monica Beach Dunes are permitted by the California Coastal Commission. The Bay Foundation implemented its first pilot dune site in Santa Monica, just north of the Annenberg Community Beach House, in 2016, and continues to make progress on similar efforts in Malibu, Manhattan Beach, and Dockweiler Beach. See our [Protecting Beaches page](#) to learn more about these.

Who is paying for all this? And what's the ROI?

The Santa Monica Beach Dunes are funded through the Santa Monica Bay Coastal Habitat Restoration Program, approved by the California Legislature and managed by the State Coastal Conservancy. Approximately \$3.5 million will be spent to support the establishment, maintenance, and monitoring of the Santa Monica Beach Dunes.

Growing sand dunes to reduce erosion and flooding is a cost-effective approach to protect coastal access and public and private infrastructure. Growing sand dunes is far more affordable and adds to the beach compared to seawalls, which can cost hundreds of times more, often at the loss of the beach they are supposed to protect.

How can I get involved?

Check out The Bay Foundation's upcoming [volunteer restoration events](#), and [sign up for email announcements](#). Give us a follow on social media @thebayfoundation to stay connected. And if you'd like to set up a standalone restoration event, please reach out to us at info@santamonicabay.org.

