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Residents: Sand for Sea Oats Beach blowing in the wind

By Kevin Wadlow Free Press Staff

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Kevin Wadlow/Free Press Sand washed ashore by Hurricane Irma has been piled along U.S. 1 to be used for restoring eroded Sea Oats Beach, where turtle nesting is common.

ISLAMORADA — A massive pile of sand delivered by Hurricane Irma could help restore the turtle-nesting ground at Sea Oats Beach.

But nearly a year and a half later, said Lower Matecumbe Key Association President Mark Riley, many residents “are hot as hornets” because the sand is still there, blowing across the island.

“We completely understand,” said Pete Frezza, Islamorada’s Environmental Resources manager. “It’s a concern for us, too. We want to get the sand back where it belongs.”

No one knows when, or if, that might happen.

The Florida Department of Transportation intends to shore up the oceanside embankment of U.S. 1 by replacing linked blocks designed to limit erosion at the low-lying highway.

“We would advise not putting [the sand] back until this project is finished,” FDOT Engineer Daniel Iglesias said Feb. 5, citing the use of heavy equipment in the restoration effort.

Plans for the erosion-control project, including work at crumbling dirt embankments along the Indian Key Fill area, are supposed to be finished by year’s end. After a bidding and evaluation process, actual work might not start until late 2020 and extend into mid-2021.

If the replacing the sand along the oceanfront would complicate FDOT’s pending plans to raise a mile or so of the highway at Sea Oats Beach, the overall project might not finish for more than five years.

Islamorada wanted to preserve the natural beach sand to entice egg-laying sea turtles who might not like an unfamiliar type of sand trucked in from the mainland.

The 4,500 cubic yards of sand in the towering pile could be worth from about \$70,000 to more than \$120,000, based on estimates of published prices for delivered sand.

Since FDOT “is requesting the village wait until they are done with their project before we pursue getting sand back on the beach,” Frezza said, Islamorada officials “are seeking some other type of re-nourishment project.”

“We know the residents are not happy,” Frezza said. “We will explore our options.”

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