

ONE-TWO PUNCH OF KATE AND ELENA HAVE BEACHES ON THE ROPES

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Written By Susan DeFord

The double wallop dealt to North Florida's beaches from Hurricanes Kate and Elena has caused the worst erosion in probably a quarter-century, one of Florida's top beach experts said Friday.

State official Robert Dean said the beaches "are in a severely eroded condition. The recovery process will take many, many years."

That assessment came after Dean and other experts surveyed Gulf and Franklin beaches by airplane Friday morning. While the dunes and beaches took a beating, most of the stilt houses and condominiums built behind them withstood the storm without apparent extensive damage.

It's still too early to tell what effect Kate had on another prime coastal resource – Apalachicola Bay.

David Heil, an administrator with the Department of Natural Resources, said it probably would be next week before marine biologist Mark Berrigan can assess damage to the bay's oyster bars, which were rebuilding after Hurricane Elena.

Elena wiped out nearly all of this year's \$6.5-million oyster crop, which supplies the nation with 10 percent of its oysters. Fishermen said they feared Kate ruined chances for a quick recovery on next season's crop.

"If we have 10 years of mild weather conditions, the beaches will recover very well. It's a very slow process." – state official Robert Dean

"It wiped out our oystering and it's wiped out the shrimping," Franklin County resident Josephine Minnotto told The Associated Press. "Now it's time to move."

Dean, director of the state's Division of Beaches and Shores, flew over the area's beaches with Tsao Y Chiu, a coastal researcher with Florida State University, and Natural Resources officials.

From the air, officials and a reported saw 10-foot-high dunes sliced in half and low-lying spots on Dog Island, St George Island and Cape San Blas completely washed over by storm-driven waves.

Kate packed winds of 110 mph when it made landfall near Gulf County's Cape San Blas on Thursday evening. Nevertheless, Dean said, Kate was not as destructive as Elena, which raked the coast with up to 100-mph winds when it stalled near Cedar Key over the Labor Day weekend.

Dean said post-storm surveys indicate Franklin and Gulf beaches eroded approximately 40 feet as a result of Elena. Because Elena gouged out dunes and swept the sand offshore, those underwater bars slowed Kate's assault on the beach as it made landfall, he said.

In between Elena and Kate, Tropical Storm Juan's gusty winds brought abnormally high tides and thunderstorms in late October.

"This is the worst year since I don't know when," Dean said.

Though beaches can drastically erode in a matter of a few storm-tossed hours, the rebuilding process depends on gentle waves gradually washing up offshore sand over the course of years.

"If we have 10 years of mild weather conditions, the beaches will recover very well," Dean said. "It's a very slow process."