How Many People Live in Coastal Counties?

FEMA recently initiated a coastal demographics analysis to examine impacts of coastal flooding on the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). The analysis is still in its early stages; however, preliminary results contrast markedly with existing coastal demographic statistics.

As an example, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has produced some reports[1] over the past few years that examine population trends along the coastal U.S. These reports state that 53-percent of the population lives in coastal counties. However, "coastal county," is generally defined in the NOAA reports as a county in which at least 15-percent of its total land area is located within a coastal watershed. The NOAA definition, while useful for certain types of analyses, (coastal water quality, for example), is too inclusive for purposes of analyzing coastal flood impact on the NFIP. In addition, NOAA watershed-based coastal demographic data are often cited in the scientific literature regarding impacts of beach erosion and/or sea level rise on the coastal population, which is an inappropriate dataset to use for these purposes.

FEMA decided to look at other criteria for defining "coastal county" that would best apply to coastal flood studies. "Coastal county" as used in this analysis is any county that contains a V Zone (that is, counties impacted by flooding from coastal storms) or borders the open ocean coast. The results of this analysis are illustrated by comparing the two sets of maps, at right.

Search for publications on coastal flooding at www.fema.gov/library.

1 Crossett, K.M., T. J. Culliton, P.C. Wiley, T.R. Goodspeed. *Population Trends Along the Coastal United States: 1980-2008*. NOAA Coastal Trends Report Series. September 2004. Silver Spring, MD: NOAA.

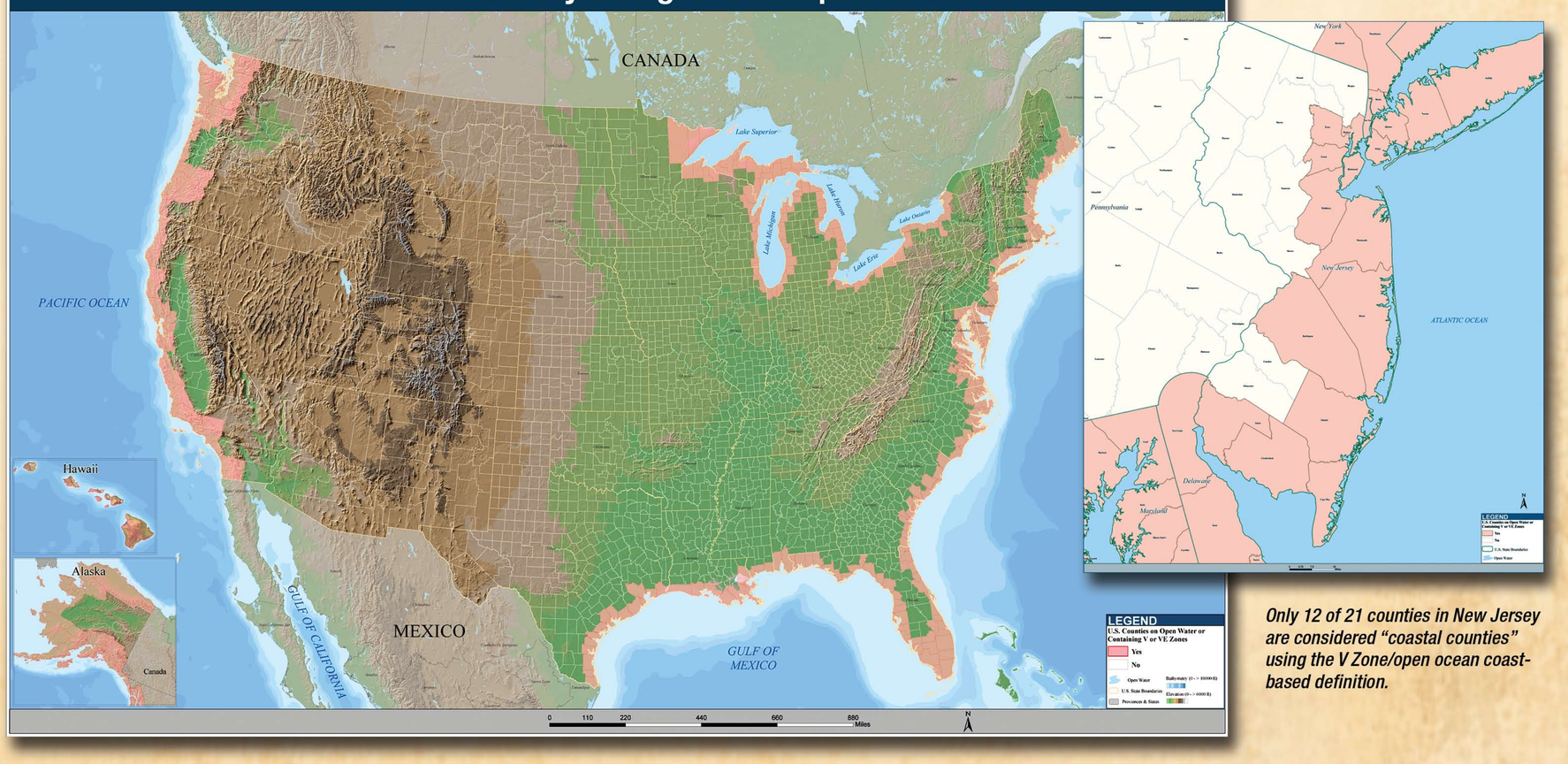
Culliton, T.J. *Population: Distribution, Density, and Growth*. NOAA's State of the Coast Report. 1998. Silver Spring, MD: NOAA.

U.S. Counties Defined as Coastal by NOAA

This map displays U.S. coastal counties as defined using NOAA's criteria. Note that 673 counties are considered "coastal counties" and that 53-percent of the population lives in these counties.

Twenty of 21 counties in New Jersey are considered "coastal counties" using the NOAA definition. This includes Sussex County, a county that is completely landlocked and located entirely within the piedmont and mountains of New Jersey.

U.S. Counties Defined as Coastal by Using V Zone/Open Ocean Coast Criteria



This map displays U.S. coastal counties as defined using the V Zone/open ocean coast-based definition. Note that 265 counties are considered "coastal counties" using this definition and that 36-percent of the population lives in these counties.

Only 12 of 21 counties in New Jersey are considered "coastal counties" using the V Zone/open ocean coast-based definition.

DATA SOURCES: NOAA's List of Coastal Counties: www.census.gov/geo/landview/lv6help/coastal_cty.pdf; U.S. Counties on Open Water or Containing V or VE Zones map: National Flood Risk and Regional Funding Distribution FY06-FY08 database.

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