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Hawaii tourism could dive if Waikiki beaches erode

By The Associated Press

HONOLULU — Hawaii's tourism-driven economy would plummet financially if the world-famous beaches in Waikiki vanish from erosion, according to a new report.

A \$60,000 study financed by the Hawaii Tourism Authority and the Waikiki Improvement Association estimates that a complete erosion of the Waikiki shoreline would make tourism tumble and trigger the loss of 6,000 jobs. It estimated the financial costs could reach as much as \$2 billion a year in lost spending, lost jobs and more.

The study asked 500 visitors whether they would return to Waikiki if the beach were "completely eroded." Erosion is a problem along many Hawaii popular beaches. There is also the threat of sea level rise, but how long it would take for Waikiki's beaches to completely disappear is unclear.

Some estimate within a decade or two.

"The beach is going to disappear (if nothing is done)," said Chip Fletcher, a University of Hawaii coastal geology professor. "It's already gone along much of the Waikiki shoreline."

The state Office of Conservation and Coastal Lands said it would cost \$30 million to protect the beach. It is now drafting a 10-year plan to fight erosion.

Meanwhile, the owner of at least one hotel, the Sheraton Waikiki, is preparing its own \$4 million effort to fight erosion on the beach fronting its property. A public meeting on the plan is set for Dec. 17.

"Obviously, we're going to have to spend some money to maintain the beach," said Rick Egged, president of the Waikiki Improvement Association. "The purpose of the study was to get hard data of the value of the beach."

The report says about 58 percent of visitors from the U.S. and Canada would "not consider staying in Waikiki" if the beach were completely eroded. With visitors from Japan, the majority say they would return with just 14 percent saying that they would not come if the beach were gone.

The state in January 2007 completed a \$475,000 demonstration project to pump 9,500 cubic yards of sands from offshore to Kuhio Beach in Waikiki. The project is supposed to be repeated within five years.

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