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Editorial

Editorial: Don't rush to plug Fire Island breach

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Photo credit: Doug Kuntz | A breach in Fire Island is shown. (Dec. 20, 2012)

In just a few hours, Sandy seems to have done what many years of effort and many millions of dollars couldn't: jump-start a healthier [Great South Bay](#).

This unexpected dividend from the superstorm's devastation is a breach of Fire Island that has created a new path for fresh ocean water to flush out the polluted waters of the eastern bay, an area plagued by red and brown tides. The [Army Corps of Engineers](#), which has already closed the two larger cuts in the barrier island, is prepared to close the one in the part of the Fire Island National Seashore known as the Otis Pike High Dune Wilderness.

That would be a mistake. Let nature take its course.

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Charles N. Flagg of [Stony Brook University](#)'s School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences has been monitoring the breach from the air. Flagg estimates that at its widest, the breach is 150 meters -- about the length of

1 1/2 football fields -- and that's pretty small, compared to the established and manually maintained inlets at Fire Island and [Moriches](#). More important, Flagg and others have determined that the salinity of the Great South Bay has risen from the influx of ocean water -- and that means more oxygen and fewer pollutants. This benefits shellfish, fin fish and the growth of dune grass. Local fishing boat operators are reporting a cleaner bay.

Flagg has been watching the tides, too. Other than high tide arriving about 18-20 minutes earlier along the interior shoreline, there seem to be few other changes. It's even possible that the breach might act as an escape valve when high winds send more water into the bay.

A decision to wait and monitor the breach's impact is not without some risks. But in the three months since Sandy, there has been no increased flooding to the low-lying coastal communities such as the [Moriches](#) and [Mastic Beach](#). So, as the [Nature Conservancy](#) advises the [National Park Service](#), "There is no need to hastily react as if it were an emergency." Besides, estimates are that it would cost about \$6 million to close the opening -- that's money that can be put to more immediate restoration needs along the coastline.

Action to close the two larger breaches began 48 hours after Sandy under the 1996 [New York State Breach Contingency Plans](#) developed by the [Army Corps](#), the [National Park Service](#) and the state [Department of Environmental Conservation](#). The parks service and DEC Commissioner Joseph Martens are taking a wait-and-see approach on the wilderness breach. That's the wise choice.

The breach, which is considered stable, is being closely monitored. In time, months or years, migrating sand will fill it. If it gets larger and the threat of flooding increases, that's when man, not nature should act.

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