

Facts and findings: Sea level rise and storm surge threats for South Carolina

See the full report, *Surging Seas*, for methods used and national findings: [SurgingSeas.org/report](https://surgingseas.org/report)

Storms and the rising sea

Even small amounts of sea level rise make rare floods more common by adding to tides and storm surge. Climate Central has analyzed data and made projections at water level stations in and near South Carolina. For a representative station¹:

1. Odds of a 100-year flood or worse by 2030, with sea level rise from global warming²: **22%**
2. Odds without global warming³: **12%**
3. Bottom line: global warming multiplies the odds by **1.9X**
4. Historic local sea level rise rate⁴: **1.2 inches/decade**
5. Projected new sea level rise by 2050⁵: **13 inches**

People, homes and land at risk

Climate Central has developed maps and statistics for South Carolina areas less than 1-10 feet above the local high tide line, including searchable results for every coastal town, city and county, accessible via [SurgingSeas.org/states/SC](https://surgingseas.org/states/SC). A summary of vulnerability⁶ at less than 5 feet⁷:

1. Population at risk: **88,000**⁸
2. Homes at risk: **62,000**
3. Land area at risk⁹: **384,000 acres**
4. Towns and cities where at least half the population is at risk: **3**
5. Counties where at least 10% of the population is at risk: **1**
6. Cities with the largest total exposed populations, ranked most to least: Mount Pleasant, Charleston, Isle of Palms, North Charleston, Port Royal, North Myrtle Beach, Beaufort, Hilton Head Island, Folly Beach, Georgetown
7. Counties with the largest total exposed populations, ranked most to least: Charleston, Beaufort, Georgetown, Horry, Berkeley, Colleton, Jasper, Dorchester, Hampton, Williamsburg

Special considerations for South Carolina

1. Charleston and vicinity is the most concentrated area of risk.
2. The South Carolina economy relies significantly on tourism concentrated on the coast.
3. Coastal wetlands and beaches, if allowed to migrate as seas rise, may help to reduce the impact of higher sea levels.

Preparations already underway

1. [South Carolina Shoreline Change Initiative](#)

Table: Sea level and high water projections throughout South Carolina

Sea level rise projections take into account global and local effects, and vary by site due to differences in local effects, most importantly different rates of sinking or rising land. Scenarios without global warming remove only global effects, both historical and projected. Differences in storm surge patterns and sea level projections together lead to different flood level exceedance odds in different places.

Water level station	Reference 100-year flood level (feet) ²	Odds of exceeding reference flood level by 2030		Measured historic sea level rise ⁴		Projected sea level rise by 2050 ⁵	
		With global warming ²	Without global warming ³	Inches rise	Period of record	Inches rise 2009-2050	90% range
Springmaid Pier - Atlantic Ocean	4.1	36%	6%	8	1957-2006	14	7-25
Charleston - Cooper River Entrance	5.1	22%	12%	11	1921-2006	13	6-23
Fort Pulaski - Savannah River (GA)	3.3	83%	0%	8	1935-2006	13	6-24

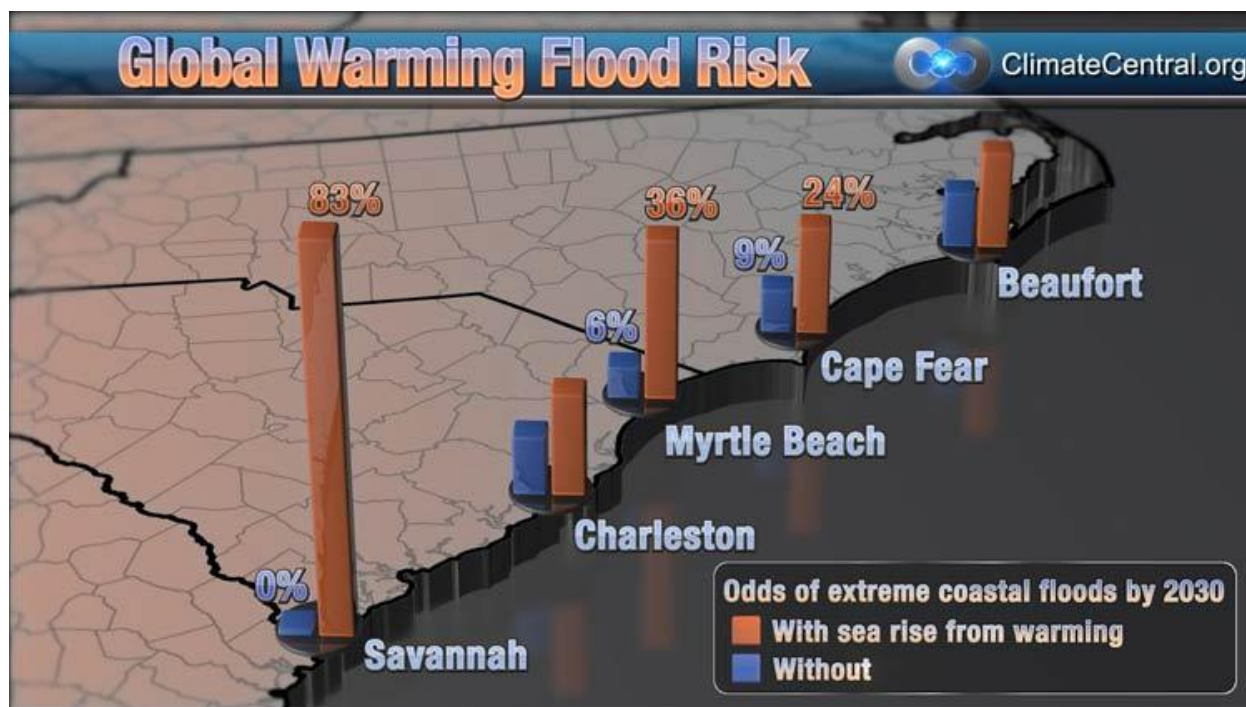


Figure 1. Odds of reference 100-year floods² when factoring in sea level rise from global warming, versus when not. See Table for state source data.

Limitations

All values presented here are best estimates based on Climate Central's peer-reviewed analysis. Actual values may vary. For discussion of methods, assumptions and limitations, see the full report [Surging Seas](#) and its citations.

Licensing

You may republish this fact sheet and/or its tables and graphics online, in their original form, provided you cite Climate Central and provide a link to sealevel.climatecentral.org. You must seek prior permission for print republication. You may also not sell or edit our content without permission. Contact us with questions or for permissions at republish@climatecentral.org. For more detailed information on our policy, see <http://www.climatecentral.org/about/republish-our-content>.

About Climate Central

Climate Central is an independent, non-profit journalism and research organization. For more information, visit climatecentral.org/about.

Notes

¹ At the Cooper River Entrance in Charleston. A table near the end of this sheet gives findings for other South Carolina area stations. All values in this list and in the table represent best estimates within wider possible ranges.

² A 100-year flood is defined as a flood reaching a fixed elevation so high that it is expected to take place with only a 1% chance in a year, here assuming a water elevation baseline at 2009 sea level. But because sea level is rising, the odds of floods reaching any fixed elevation become higher over time.

³ This value comes from calculations assuming no past or future sea level rise from melting ice sheets and glaciers, or from ocean expansion due to warming. (Global average sea level has already risen about 8 inches since 1880, known to be mostly or all from warming. This analysis assumes 90% was from warming.) The calculation also assumes global warming does not affect storms, surges or tides.

⁴ Source: Zervas, C. 2009. [Sea Level Variations of the United States, 1854-2006](#), NOAA Technical Report NOS CO-OPS 053.

⁵ Projections take into account multiple possible 1) future scenarios of heat-trapping gas emissions; 2) relationships between emissions and global warming; and 3) relationships between warming and sea level rise. See table for confidence ranges, and the full report [Surging Seas](#) for 2030 projections and further details.

⁶ Many areas may be protected, to some degree, by sea walls, levees, forced drainage, or other features – for example, much of New Orleans already lies below the high tide line. This analysis presents vulnerability considering elevation only.

⁷ A height near the middle of the range of 100-year flood levels calculated for South Carolina area stations.

⁸ This is 1% of the coastal contiguous US population living less than 5 feet above the high tide line, and 2% of South Carolina's total population living at any elevation.

⁹ Includes freshwater wetlands as classified by the National Wetlands Inventory, but not marine or estuarine ones. Excluding freshwater wetlands as well, the total dry land area at risk is 152,000 acres.

Disclaimer

All content found herein is provided solely for personal informational purposes and is provided “AS-IS.” You acknowledge and agree that your use and possession of this content is subject to, and you agree to the provisions set forth in, Climate Central's Terms of Use (http://www.climatecentral.org/about/legal#terms_of_use), Privacy Policy (http://www.climatecentral.org/about/legal#privacy_policy) and Disclaimer (<http://sealevel.climatecentral.org/about/disclaimer>).