CALIFORNIA COASTAL COMMISSION

SANDBAG BEST PRACTICES

Executive Order N-14-26 (signed October 27, 2026) exempts the placement of temporary sandbags from California Coastal Act permitting requirements for this 2026-27 El Niño season. This exemption applies to any type or size of sandbag, filled with sand only.

Best practices are an important part of any storm preparation and response project, regardless of permitting requirements because they help protect coastal resources, public access, and our coastal economy during construction. See below for the best practices that the Coastal Commission recommends for sandbag projects, to the extent they are feasible and as time and circumstances allow. **Reach out to your nearest Coastal Commission office to confirm whether you qualify for this exemption and for additional guidance on applying these best practices to your specific project.**

What Type of Sandbag Should I Use?

- Fill sandbags with beach-compatible materials sourced from local projects, where feasible. Do not use sand from the beach—that sand is also helping to protect your property. Do not use concrete bags or materials that harden over time.
- **Do not use small sandbags where there will be waves.** Typical small sandbags (14 x 26 inch) do not provide sufficient protection from waves and are likely to fail and create ocean pollution. For more robust protection from waves, high-performance geotextile sandbags (with capacity of over 1 to 2 cubic yards) are preferred over intermediate bulk container (IBC) bags (which are sometimes referred to as “sand cubes”). IBC bags are not designed for open coast environments, prolonged UV exposure, or repeated stress.
- For areas without waves, non-plastic alternatives (such as natural-fiber fiber rolls) may be sufficient and preferable over sandbags to reduce the potential for plastic pollution.
- Your local government may provide free sandbags. Make sure they meet the best practices above to the extent feasible.

Best Practices During Emergency Circumstances:

- Obtain authorizations or permits from other agencies as applicable.
- Consult with relevant professionals (e.g., licensed engineers, contractors) as needed to oversee installation and ensure that work is limited to the minimum necessary to address the emergency. Provide your contractor with the **Engineering Recommendations** on page 3.
- Ensure compliance with any existing property or permit restrictions, including any conditions of approval of any existing Coastal Development Permits that apply to the site.

Photo Credit: Coastal Frontiers Corporation

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Best Practices During Emergency Circumstances (continued):

- Avoid placing sandbags on or near anything that can cause tearing, like angular rock or exposed rebar.
- Avoid placing sandbags in areas with dune vegetation.
- Arrange the sandbags in the minimum footprint necessary.
- Avoid working in the water if possible. Do not place or store any construction material or waste where it may enter coastal waters or natural habitats.
- Avoid impacts to coastal resources (including beach access, biological resources such as active bird nests and active grunion spawning areas, and cultural resources) to the extent possible. Have qualified professionals (e.g., a biological monitor) onsite to help you avoid impacts to coastal resources as time allows.
- Notify Commission staff before work when possible.
- Properly dispose of any construction waste immediately.
- After work is completed, contact Commission staff to confirm any unavoidable coastal resource impacts. Restore all work areas around the sandbags to pre-construction conditions.
- Inspect for sandbag movement and degradation often, especially after storms. Replace degraded sandbags as needed to avoid plastic pollution and improve flood and erosion protection.
- Remove the sandbags when they are no longer needed to mitigate the impacts of this El Niño season (~May 1, 2027 or later as needed).

If Mechanized Equipment Will Be Used:

- Keep activities contained within defined construction, staging, and storage areas. Use fencing to separate work areas from public recreational use areas where necessary.
- Keep heavy machinery out of the water as feasible.
- Avoid refueling and washing mechanized equipment within 100 feet of coastal waters.
- Have an oil spill response plan in place. Contain and clean up spills immediately.
- Clean construction equipment prior to entering the work site to minimize introduction of non-native or invasive species.

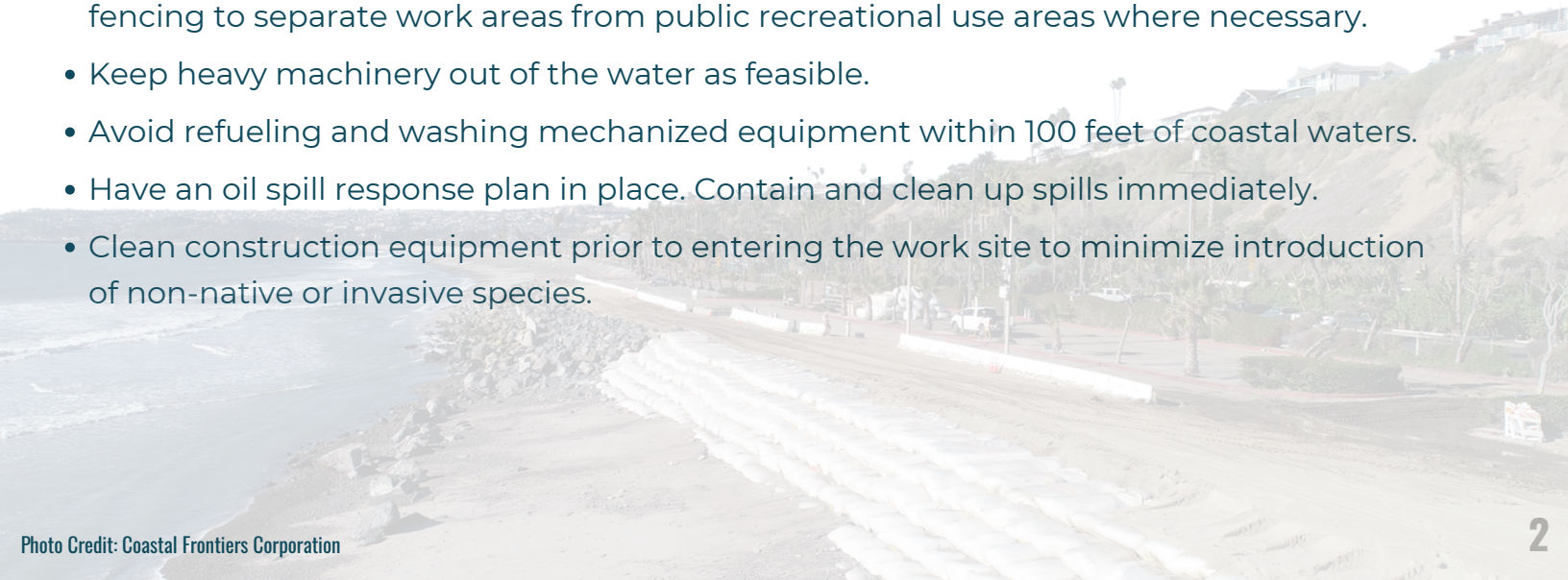


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Engineering Recommendations for Contractors:

- Arrange the sandbags in the minimum footprint necessary in layers where the middle of bags are placed on top of the edges of the bags below (target 50% overlap).
- Sandbag fabric will degrade more quickly if left exposed to UV. Bury sandbags when possible and recover within 30-days if exposed after a storm.
- Sandbags can be tied together to limit fabric debris from being washed away.
- Sandbags should be oriented with their long axis perpendicular to shore and staggered (nested) in the longshore direction.
- It is good practice to place geotextile filter fabric behind sandbags. Where geotextile fabric is used, it should be woven and permeable. Designers should confirm tensile strength of the fabric and the seam are appropriate for the given environment.
- Sandbags should be keyed in.
- Sandbags should have redundant closures to limit the risk of them coming apart at the seams.
- Consider using sandbags with straps, so they can be easily moved and reused if needed.
- Avoid placing sandbags beyond the reach of excavators (e.g., in subtidal or “predominantly wet” areas), so they can be removed.
- Confirm the weight of the bags is appropriate for the given wave climate.

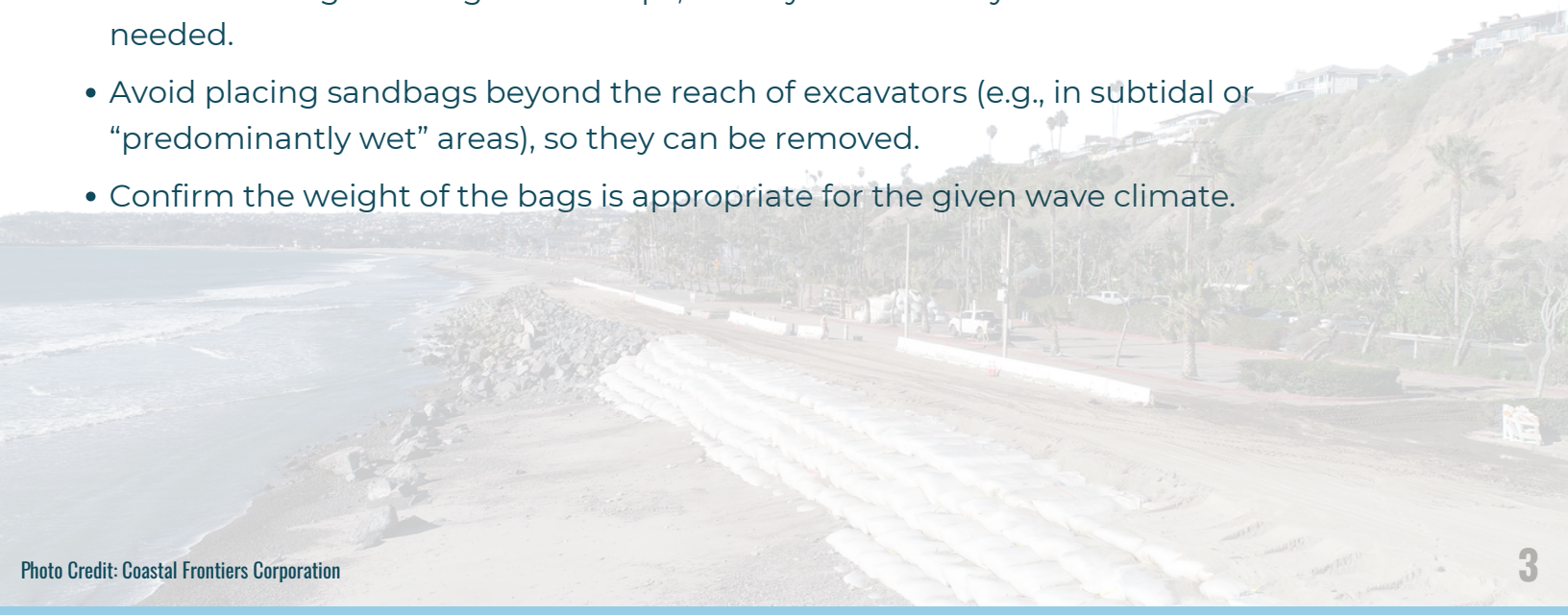


Photo Credit: Coastal Frontiers Corporation

All exempt sandbags should be removed after the 2026-27 El Niño season.

Questions? Contact your nearest Commission district office at:
www.coastal.ca.gov/contact/

Learn more about El Niño storm preparation & response at:
https://www.coastal.ca.gov/climate/extreme-weather/el-nino/