NOAA announces funding for reconstruction of Beaufort Lab Building 2

KATHLEEN HOPEWELL NEWS-TIMES
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PIVERS ISLAND — NOAA announced plans Thursday to fund the reconstruction of a key laboratory building on its Beaufort Lab campus after structural damage forced its closure in late 2024.

The project will be funded using $64 million from the 2025 Disaster Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, with design and preconstruction work slated to start in early 2027.

The NOAA Beaufort Lab is the nation's second-oldest federal marine science laboratory. The campus houses multiple operations of the federal agency, including the National Ocean Service, the National Marine Fisheries Service, and the North Carolina Coastal Reserve and National Estuarine Research Reserve.

Building 2, constructed in 1954, sustained foundational damage during a storm event and was declared uninhabitable following a routine inspection in October 2024. According to NOAA, the replacement facility will be built above the floodplain and engineered to withstand future severe storms and flooding.

"For more than a century, the dedicated experts at NOAA's Beaufort Laboratory have produced world-class science that supports our economy, advances national priorities, and enhances coastal resilience," said Neil Jacobs, NOAA administrator. "This state-of-the-art facility, located within the country's second-largest estuary and adjacent to the Gulf Stream, will enable NOAA to continue its groundbreaking research while strengthening collaboration with industry and academic partners."

Agency officials said the new facility will expand research and services in coastal North Carolina and nationwide by:

- Monitoring and forecasting harmful algal blooms.
- Deploying uncrewed systems for underwater habitat mapping and coral restoration.
- Serving as a research hub for South Atlantic fisheries management.
- Evaluating natural infrastructure for coastal protection.
- Managing the Rachel Carson National Estuarine Research Reserve and supporting education, research, and

traditional uses.

Many of the Beaufort Lab's operations took place in Building 2's facilities, according to former NOAA employee Ruth Kelty. Kelty specifically shared with the News-Times that Building 2 housed, "nearly all the functional laboratory space on campus and office space for about 40% of the Lab's personnel.

Roughly 70 NOAA researchers were displaced when the two-story, 20,817 square-foot building closed. As a result of the closure, Kelty added that staff were, as of January 2025, "doubling up on offices and utilizing swing space to conduct essential tasks."

The nearby University of North Carolina Institute of Marine Sciences even offered a temporary workspace to about 10 displaced Beaufort Lab personnel monitoring harmful algal blooms, according to former UNC-IMS Director Joel Fodrie.

An internal Nov. 2024 background document on the building's closure provided by Kelty shows the closure interrupted several key initiatives, including:

- Stock assessments and life history research for red snapper, Atlantic menhaden, and deepwater groupers.
- Video analysis of ship-based monitoring for federally managed reef fish species in the southeastern Atlantic.
- Detection, monitoring and forecasting of Harmful Algal Blooms
- Work involving uncrewed systems, including autonomous underwater vehicles, saildrones, aerial drones, and remotely operated vehicles.

In preparation for the reconstruction, NOAA raised a surrounding protective seawall, rebuilt piers for research vessels, installed a living shoreline, and updated the campus administrative building.

Thursday's announcement from NOAA marks a critical step in a long-awaited project that would effectively restore the Beaufort Lab's functionality and allow staff to return on site permanently.